The distant moon

I

“King Gorath?” a voice called into the chamber.

King Gorath, ruler of the city of Synestra, looked up from where he was kneeling. A Xanogar, Gorath was about six feet tall with a medium build. His skin was the same grayish white that all his people had, and his facial features were about the same. An average mouth, aquiline nose, and dark hair that was just beginning to show hints of white, Gorath would have been considered neither handsome nor ugly by his people.

Gorath had been meditating quietly, strengthening his mind for the duties ahead. He looked up and addressed the person in front of him. “Tarok, you know that I always go into isolation at this hour. You risk my displeasure unless your news is great.”

Tarok was the pilot of his personal air shuttle. Younger and with softer features than Gorath, the pilot had served him well for years. His parents had died in a shuttle accident, but Tarok had followed in their footsteps and had distinguished himself to the point of being hired by the nobility.

“Yes, my lord,” Tarok answered. “You will forgive me, but I wanted to tell you that at last, we have succeeded.”

Gorath’s eye narrowed in disbelief. “Truly? But my engineers have worked on it for years. Am I to believe that they have finally created a working model?”

The pilot nodded excitedly. “Yes, my king. At last, our dream of space travel is realized.”

Gorath began pacing, feeling anticipation well up in him. This was big news indeed. Long had he dreamed of leading the kingdom into a bright new future. It was one of the things for which he had just been trying to strengthen his mind.

He was the descendant of the legendary warrior prophetess Synestra, who had united the various primitive tribes of Xanogar into one people thousands ago. As the population grew, and finally reached its current number of half a billion, colony city-states had split off and, although nominally still under the rule of the city of Synestra, had fought for independence.

There had been many civil wars over the millennia, especially after secularism had replaced earlier pagan religions. Then Gorath's grandfather had quelled the most recent uprising. Unfortunately, while there had been peace, there had also been stagnation and petty squabbling among the rulers and the lesser noblemen in charge of the satellite cities. Crime and corruption had steadily increased, and food became harder to find as the population grew. Gorath wanted to move the planet forward, into a golden age where all would be as one and revere their rulers as they once did.

But he had realized early on that he needed a lever, something to hold the attention of his fellow nobles. Repeated social reforms had failed miserably. As for martial law, he didn't have sufficient soldiers or weaponry to make the world more efficient by force (at least not yet).

The only other option had been to develop an adequate bargaining chip in dealing with the noblemen under him. In the past, technology had been the means by which one faction had gained power over another. The problem, of course, was that one's rivals always obtained the technology after a few years themselves. That made speed of the utmost importance. But if Tarok was right, perhaps he could finally act.

Gorath walked over to a nearby intercom, and activated it. "I will be here for the next several hours. See that I am not disturbed."

He turned back to Tarok. "No one must know yet," he said quietly. "But if you're right, then I can finally call a meeting of the nobles. Show me at once."

A few minutes later, the two stepped out of an elevator opening into the hangar bay. The only vehicle was a steel gray shuttle being worked on by an ageing Xanogar, one of Gorath's engineers. He stooped over an open hatch, attaching wires to a glowing tetrahedral object.

As they approached, the engineer looked over his shoulder and, upon recognizing his master, stood up and bowed. "Your majesty."

Gorath nodded at him. "Tarok has just informed me of your success. I am here to congratulate you and request a demonstration."

"Certainly," he answered, smiling. "I will finish wiring the Star Crystals first."

The Star Crystals had been discovered in a valley near the city of Lord Faldarian. They had the peculiar ability to repel gravity when provided with an electric charge. Furthermore, they also generated a field of protection several feet around them whenever they were sufficiently charged. This both had the potential to propel a ship without fuel, and protect them when they navigated through the treacherous rings of Xodos. Both factors had been impediments behind developing reliable space travel. Indeed, even unmanned probes had been both costly and inefficient to launch in orbit.

Tarok sat at a terminal near the shuttle. He would pilot the ship remotely while cameras in the cockpit would capture everything that could be seen through the view screens showing both front and rear views. Assuming that this test was a success, perhaps a manned flight into space could at last be seriously considered.

Tarok looked over his shoulder. "Are you ready, your majesty?" he asked.

"Do it," Gorath replied.

Tarok nodded and flew the ship out of the docking bay. The shuttle's rear viewer showed their city receding in the distance. The palace was an iron sphere held up by three towers spaced evenly apart in a triangular formation. The other buildings were all identical grey towers that stood dozens of stories high, and were arranged geometrically around the palace in the center. Between them, several other air shuttles flew, oblivious to the momentous occasion they had just unknowingly witnessed.

Overall, Synestra was a city that showed the Xanogar tendency to sacrifice elegance for utility. It functioned perfectly, but there was no pretence in creating beauty. There was really no time for that, as the cold planet had never been an easy place to live. From time unknown, the Xanogar civilization had huddled close to the equator for food and warmth. The polar regions were so cold as to be useless to them. Only the slow increase in medicine and technology had enabled the race to get as large in number as it had.

Turning ahead, Gorath saw the air shuttle climb higher and higher, finally cutting through the clouds, and giving him a view free of snow. His pilot looked at the king and nodded. Tarok surprisingly felt little doubt that the device would deliver its promise.

"Activating Star Crystals now," Tarok announced. He punched in a few commands from a panel next to his seat. A humming sound filled the cockpit, and Gorath saw the ship lurch forward. As it picked up speed, the sky gradually faded to blackness. Gorath's eye widened in amazement as he was greeted by a field of darkness broken by infinite points of light that were the countless other suns in the universe.

A band of floating rocks bisected the view, and Gorath realized that he was looking at the rings of Xodos. He gasped as the shuttle flew into them. The breathtaking view offered sparkling mountains and grains of sand all mixed together and creating a unique beauty.

How ironic, Gorath thought, as he searched for a pattern to it all, and found none whatsoever. I never thought there could be beauty in chaos.

And yet, it was so. The rings had an untamable wildness about them that made him think of the early days of Xodos when the Xanogar tribes had fought and died for their fellow men against a harsh and uncaring world. The struggles had been terrible, and yet exhilarating. So it was with the planetoids here, flying through space, sometimes crashing into each other, and sometimes remaining intact. Yes, there was definitely a savage beauty in all of this.

Unfortunately, the spectacle ended all too soon as their ship passed through the rings and soared out into space. The shields had successively protected the shuttle. Gorath was about to express his dismay and urge them to go back, when suddenly the view behind stopped him short. There was Xodos itself, in its entire splendor. A light blue orb with a circle of rings around it, the planet was like a rare jewel amongst the heavens.

Gorath quietly reprimanded himself for being swept away by the disorder of the rings back there. Yes, there was beauty in chaos, but still greater beauty in order. Seeing the planet as a whole reminded him of the time after Synestra had lived when the Xanogar had discovered the skills of agriculture, writing, building and technology. Thus several dozen satellite cities had grown up around the warmest parts of Xodos, and they had all praised their minds for their vast abilities. Yes, order was indeed a wondrous thing.

“Tarok, turn the shuttle outward, towards the moons, but don’t fly any further,” Gorath ordered. I wish to run some further tests before we travel to them.”

“Yes, your Majesty,” Tarok said, swinging the shuttle around. The view of Xodos slid away, and Gorath concentrated his view outward. He saw the first two moons of Xodos from a distance, and knew from space probes that they could support life. The first moon was covered with tundra,

but no real animal life. The second moon, by contrast, had a thick atmosphere and was covered with jungles. It was much hotter than Xodos, but also capable of sustaining life.

“With space travel at our disposal, we can decide how the moons are to be settled and used. That will give us a focal point, a goal that our people can rally around. Perhaps even enough to get the noblemen to come together. Then, just think of what we could do. What we could find and create.

“Assuming there is no problem with the third moon,” Gorath said. Gorath stopped talking and pointed to a spot at the edge of the viewport. There, barely visible, was the small and faraway form of Xodos’ third and farthest moon. It orbited the planet opposite the nearer moons, so Xodos was always between it and the others. Since they were relatively far out, it could barely be glimpsed around Xodos, as a faint speck. His pilot looked at him questioningly.

“You know of what I speak,” Gorath continued. “The distant moon has been something of a mystery. Unlike the other two moons, we have never managed to send a probe there. Several attempts have been made over the last few decades, but all have met with failure. The probes always get within a certain distance of the planet, and then shut down. They don’t malfunction or explode, they simply deactivate.”

Gorath nodded, looking thoughtfully out at the heavens. “You know, I have the feeling that something very interesting awaits us there,” he said. “But first things first.”

Tarok didn’t reply, although he too would be a part of the first manned flight into space. However, his thoughts ran in a very different direction than Gorath’s. He had felt a giddiness and excitement that he hadn’t felt since long before his parents had been killed.

His father had been a wonderer in his youth, working various odd jobs and moving from city to city. Then he had met Tarok’s mother and, because of his love for her, had given up his

vagabond lifestyle, joined her faith, and married her. For his mother did not worship the self, as most others did. She was part of a small sect that believed in one Creator, one who was above and beyond all creation, and not limited to any one aspect of it. They believed him to be all powerful, but good, and that he had created the universe and the Xanogar out of pure thought to be his children. Furthermore, there was a prophecy in their book of sacred writing, attributed to Synestra herself, that he would one day return to his world for his people. Their faith was a small minority, and largely ignored by the secular culture.

It hadn't been easy growing up as a Creator worshipper. Tarok had tried to show his neighbors kindness and consideration, but most people ignored, laughed or became hostile when he tried to share his faith with them. So he only tried occasionally, especially after his parents had died in that accident. Still, he had wanted his life to mean something, to leave a mark that would win the approval of his fellow men, and perhaps, even persuade them to consider the Creator after all. He had secretly longed for adventure, and felt that he was now on the verge of one.

"Take the shuttle back here, pilot," Gorath ordered, cutting off his thoughts. "It is time to announce our discovery to the world."

II

A few days later, Gorath was standing in the shuttle hanger, watching the last dignitary's shuttle land. The hatch opened, and Lord Zyndatha came forward to greet him, followed by a man in a general's uniform. Zyndatha was head of an industrial city state near Synestra, and one of Gorath's most loyal supporters. Overweight and unshaven, dressed in a rumpled brown robe, Zyndatha stood in marked contrast to the grim general, whose cropped hair, meticulous uniform, and strutting gait conveyed both arrogance and ability.

“Greetings, Lord Zyndatha,” Gorath said. “It is a pleasure to see you again. I don’t believe I’ve met your companion here.”

“I am General Kane, my lord,” the military man replied “Head of Lord Zyndatha’s security.” He nodded his head, but neither bowed nor offered his hand. Instead, his gaze looked over Gorath, with his splendid white robes and pampered look and barely concealed a snort. He had little use for non warriors; even Zyndatha he only served because the other nobleman had been the one who had given him his position in the first place.

Gorath’s eyes narrowed at the slight lack of reverence, and Zyndatha quickly stepped in to avoid an argument. True, Kane could be exasperating, but his merit was unquestioned. “So, I hear you have finally succeeded,” he offered.

“I have. I assume you and your scientists analyzed the data to see that it is authentic?”

Zyndatha nodded. “Most impressive, King Gorath. I would learn more about your flight. To say nothing of the motivation for it.”

“My motivation, you say?” Gorath echoed as they all entered the elevator and descended to the throne room. “A new world, my friend. One that will benefit the people in general and the respected – like us- in particular.”

The throne room was a vast spherical room with blue lights built into the walls. It resembled an ice cavern more than anything else. Seated on makeshift chairs around a central, elevated throne were the other dignitaries. The pilot, Tarok, was with them as well, as Gorath had decided that his own pilot would be trusted with what would come next.

A light shone down on the central throne, drawing attention there. Gorath walked up to the throne and sat down. When Zyndatha found his seat, he began to speak.

“All are here now,” he began. “As you have been informed ahead of time, my attempts to develop space travel have finally succeeded. We have developed the Star Crystals into a working engine, and have flown from the rings of Xodos and back within an hour’s time. No other city in history has even come close.

“Of course, this will mean the beginning of a new era for us. There are three moons in our solar system, two of which are capable of supporting life. That means land, resources, perhaps even food supplies, just waiting for us to take and use for our own.”

“But who shall use it, King Gorath?” an old, bearded nobleman asked, standing up. Gorath recognized him as Lord Faldarian, well known for his wisdom and honest dealings. Several of the others murmured their assent, and the king felt a slight relief that it was Faldarian initiating the inevitable open questioning. He could speak to him directly, without fear of being plotted against. Furthermore, he was so well respected, that the others would tend to agree with him.

“A fair question, my lord,” he conceded. “Of course, all must be shared equally. I want all our people to benefit, not myself alone.”

“A noble statement, my lord, but what promise do we have?” General Kane asked. “There would have to be someone to ensure that you didn’t keep the best for yourself. And who would that be? How would we know that you didn’t pay for their silence?”

“You accuse me, general?” Gorath asked. “Am I on trial then, for attempting to share good fortune?”

“Not at all,” Kane answered, refusing to be intimidated. “I recognize your integrity in sharing the news with us. But there seems no way to equally share when there are so many…conflicts of interest.”

Everyone began talking and argueing at once, and Gorath waited patiently until Lord Faldarian stood up again. “Enough! All of you!” He shouted.

It took several minutes, but they finally quieted back down. “We will never reach a solution this way. Now, King Gorath, you must have an answer to this problem, or you would not have invited us here. Let us hear your proposal.”

“Very perceptive, Lord Faldarian,” Gorath congratulated. “Yes, my friends, I see that no one of us can step forward unless we all step forward. Therefore, I propose that each one of you will transfer your main manufacturing plants to the city of Synestra, and all work together. No one group will retain shuttle building capability outside of here, but all will work on the new ships that will take us to the stars.”

The shouts of protest began anew, and Gorath stood, speaking loudly to his guests.

“It is your choice,” he said firmly. “Either accept my proposal, or I will keep spaceflight for myself. The crown alone will take whatever is to be found on our moons.

“I am still king. And as king, I would take on two advisors to help me in this venture. Lords Zyndatha and Faldarian, both of whom are well known by all, will aid in the transference of shuttle manufacturing. They will at all times keep watch over the venture and keep all of you informed.”

Faldarian stood up. Gorath held his breath; the elder nobleman’s words could make or break his own plans. “Let us go to the stars together,” Faldarian said.

The room all nodded and spoke approvingly. Gorath pressed a button his throne, and the light overheard stopped shining overhead. Instead, it generated a holographic image of Xodos with its rings and three moons. A simple trick, but one that caused the assembly to collectively gasp in awe, as if they were just now realizing what they had agreed to.

“The world and what lies beyond will be ours,” Gorath declared.

“Long live the king!” the others chanted. Then they all cheered.

Thirty minutes later, after the promise of a decree by tomorrow, the dignitaries had left, leaving Gorath with Kane, Zyndatha and Faldarian. Kane still looked angry. “Well your majesty,” he growled. “What are your orders, then?”

“I wish to make you leader of our first manned flight to the moons. Particularly, we need to find people brave enough to go to the third moon itself,” Gorath replied.

“Ah yes, the rumored wild card of our system,” Faldarian said. “But with the space probe losses, do you really think we will find people who will volunteer?”

“Most assuredly,” Gorath said. “Many dream of becoming heroes. This would be seen by many as a chance to realize that dream. Indeed, my pilot, two of my repairman and one of my own generals have graciously volunteered.”

He turned to general Kane once again. “You will lead the expedition once the spacecraft is ready,” he told him. “You may select a dozen of your most trusted soldiers to go with you, to ensure that you remain in command. Will that be to your liking, general?”

General Kane grunted, but slowly nodded his agreement. Although he strongly suspected that Gorath felt threatened by him and was sending him away on purpose, he had to admit, the

mysteries of space had intrigued him as well. If there was anything to find, then he wanted to be sure he was among those who did.

III

Months passed, and the king's decrees were carried out. Synestra had in influx of engineers and mechanics from the other cities that began to work in the factory district of the mother city. While air shuttle production continued steadily, other plants were phased out as production in Synestra increased. Meanwhile, the best had been working on the space vessel that would take the world's first space explorers on their adventure.

One of these, Tarok, approached the palace with his things in a bag slung over his shoulder. He looked up, trying to glimpse the top floor, hundreds of feet up. It was cold as usual, but a clear day. Launching would be a relatively simple thing.

He began to feel more than a little nervous himself, now that he was here. He had been looking forward to the journey since Lord Gorath had given him the job. Now, the reality of the matter had begun to sink in. After all, how much did they know about the mysterious third moon? What could possibly be there? A previously unknown form of interference? That would explain the probes, but not the fact that the telescopes could never get a clear view of the moon. It was almost as if something was actively trying to keep the planet from being unmasked. But that was, of course, insane, wasn't it?

Well, he thought. Whatever the case, I can't leave now, when I'm standing on the steps of the palace. Quickly pushing down his fears, he walked up the steps to the palace gate.

"State your business," the guard called, when he saw him.

"Tarok, pilot," he answered, pulling out his identification and giving it to the guard. "I have been assigned to the spaceflight."

“You’re early then,” the guard answered. But he opened the gate all the same, and let him in. “Come on; I will announce you to King Gorath.”

The guard motioned him to the elevator and ascended to the top floor. When the door opened, Tarok stared in amazement. There was the ship he was going to fly.

He had expected something like the air shuttles he was used to flying, but he was confronted with something much larger. An enormous black cylinder, almost half the size of the hanger, rested on the landing pad. It was essentially featureless, except for the sizable engine mounted on the back, and the view port in front. Still, to look at the ship was to dispel any remaining doubts that Xodos had, indeed, entered a new era.

“Magnificent,” he whispered.

“It should be,” a voice remarked behind him. “It cost enough of my money.”

Tarok whirled around, surprised, and saw King Gorath walking up to him. He had been so engrossed with the ship that he hadn’t seen the guard signal for him to come up.

“My lord,” Tarok said, bowing his head. “It is an honor to serve you. I can’t wait to fly this mission.”

Gorath smiled slightly, amused at the pilot’s enthusiasm. “Come. I will show you to the cockpit. You can familiarize yourself with the controls before the others arrive.”

He led Tarok to the pilot’s seat and pointed to various switches. The only real difference between this and an air shuttle, Tarok discovered, was the fact that a few extra controls had been put in to control the Star Crystals. As he sat down and oriented himself, Gorath spoke to him about the mission.

“There will be fifteen others besides you,” he told him. “Generals Kane and Mordrak will be joining you, and leading the expedition. There will be two repairmen to keep the ship in good order, and a dozen soldiers and scientists. This isn’t a military operation per se, but I want people with discipline overseeing this.”

Gorath sat down himself before continuing. “Our civilization is changing at just the right time, Tarok. The city-states have long since reached their peak. That must be the reason for the increasing crime rates and lack of growth. We need to continue to expand, to build ourselves up. That is why we hope to find something of value on the moons.”

Before Tarok could reply, footsteps sounded outside. Gorath stood up and motioned for Tarok to follow.

“The others are here,” he said. They went out and joined the other Xanogar in front of the ship. When the two generals emerged from the elevator, they lined up and stood at attention.

Gorath stood before them all. “You are about to embark on a fabulous journey, one that will enable your names to live on for all time. You have chosen to serve me in this way, and I have chosen you. A crowd has gathered in the streets below to see you off. Already you are heroes, how much more so when you return.”

He waved his hand over the crew. “Go now. Unlock the secrets of space for all to see.”

The all applauded, and began to climb into the space ship. King Gorath stood by the door, shaking hands with them all as they boarded. Then the door slammed shut, and most of the passengers went to their quarters to secure themselves in. But the two repairmen accompanied Tarok to the cockpit. One was a man and the other a woman; both looked to be in their late twenties or early thirties. As they walked, Tarok noticed that the man had a deformed leg, and couldn’t walk quickly, but rather limped.

“Pilot, if you don’t mind, we would like to watch from here,” the man said.

“General Kane is not coming up?” he asked, surprised.

The man shook his head. “He is still suspicious of the other general, Mordrak. King Gorath picked him to go along, and I think Kane believes he is a spy.”

“The king only wants things to go smoothly, I’m sure,” Tarok said neutrally. He tried to keep the concern off of his face; he didn’t want the crew at odds before they even got off the ground. Furthermore, he was a simple pilot, and wouldn’t be able to do much if things did get out of hand.

He sighed inwardly. Stick with what you know, he thought. Pilot the ship, and trust the Creator in all things.

“Strap yourselves in,” he told the repairmen. They nodded their thanks, and sat down.

“I am Tayzar,” the man told him. He pointed to the female next to him. “This is my mate, Elnara.”

“My name is Tarok,” he said, not reacting to Tayzar’s identification of Elnara as his ‘mate’. Unlike Creator worshippers, the secular rarely married, unless it was for financial reasons. They saw no value in long term commitment. On the contrary, they disliked them because of the potential for a mate to gain power over them. As a result, they only stayed with their women when it suited them, and mothers cared for children alone.

Tarok pressed a button, opening the hangar bay doors. As the king stepped back, he activated the engine, and piloted the ship up and away from the palace. Below, they saw throngs of happy spectators cheering them on. They had all been so excited over the prospect of space travel that the populace had reacted remarkably well to the centralization of industry.

The atmosphere gave way to the cold blackness of space. They felt the pressure of gravity, but neither succumbed to it nor became weightless. For the particular properties of Star Crystals were such that they could both create artificial gravity and repel objects. Thus they would serve as both shields and main propulsion. As they approached the rings, Tayzar turned to the pilot.

“So, what made you decide to volunteer for this?” he asked. “Is your life back home as disappointing as ours?”

“Nothing like that. But I couldn’t resist the adventure,” Tarok answered.

Tayzar snorted. “Adventure,” he replied bitterly. “Elnara and I have had one disappointment after another. And half of those were supposed to be ‘adventures’. Ironic isn’t it, pilot? We try to build ourselves up, to be strong and successful, but now all Elnara and I have is each other.”

“I’m sorry,” Tarok said truthfully. “But if you ever want to talk, don’t hesitate to come up here.”

The two looked at him warily. “Why?” Elnara asked, not with Tayzar’s bitterness, but with mild surprise.

Tarok had lived among people who didn’t believe in the Creator, so he was used to this attitude. Friendship was seen as something one entered only when it provided mutual benefit by self- worshippers. They never entered it freely; for fear that they would be weakened by attachment. Weakness, in turn, was seen as the greatest impediment to worldly success.

“But my beliefs are different from yours. I would share them if you wish, but I won’t force them on you,” he said.

Tayzar said nothing, but a gradual change seemed to come over Elnara. She slowly, hesitantly, put a hand on his arm. “Thank you,” she said.

The three looked out the viewport as the ship moved away from Xodos, and towards the unknown.

IV

Presently, a light green sphere filled the viewport of the ship as it moved through the heavens. This was the nearest moon, and Tarok felt a sense of pure wonder as he saw it. Even Tayzar and Elnara seemed momentarily awed before remembering their bitterness.

General Kane came up to the cockpit. “Land the ship near the temperate regions of the planet,” he ordered. “Then we can get out of this ship for a little while.”

“Yes sir,” Tarok answered. He flew in closer to the moon. It seemed fairly simple in appearance; there were no oceans or other landmark features. Instead, it seemed to be a series of lakes and tundra.

The ship, guided by its pilot, coasted through the atmosphere, and came to a soft landing on the ground. Tarok took a look through the viewport and saw, among the grasses, a metal object that looked like a piece of scaffolding. Although clearly out of place among the deserted landscape, he recognized it as one of their many space probes. They had sent dozens over the years to the three moons and had learned much about the first two already.

“Come along, Tarok,” Kane ordered as he walked out of the cockpit.

The others were waiting by the hatch as they joined them. Putting one hand on the airlock, Kane addressed them.

“We are the first men and women ever to set foot on alien soil,” he declared. “You may look around for two hours, and then report back here to me. Because we already know much from our

probes, this part of the mission will to little more than conform what had been discovered ahead of time.”

He opened the hatch, and stepped onto the land. “Go,” he said. “Find out what you will.”

They slowly left their ship, and stepped out themselves. Tarok walked away alone, feeling some of his previous giddiness come back. He was on another world; one completely different form the one that birthed him.

The grasslands were soft beneath his boots as he walked. The air was warmer than Xodos, but still comfortable. The skies were clear, and the sun shone down on them, feeling good after being confined to the pilot’s seat.

Presently, he came to a lake and decided to sit down for a while. Gentle waves washed over a small beach, and he saw a few crab like animals skittering to and fro across the sands. Below the surface of the clear lake, he saw several verities of fish swimming, oblivious to the alien intruders above.

Two hours later, he returned to the landing site as instructed. The others came from all different directions, looking satisfied, but unimpressed.

“Make your reports,” Kane ordered.

“Just as we suspected, general,” Elnara said. “Only small animals and plants. No predators or anything else that could pose dangers. The samples I took appear edible as well.”

“I’ve detected mineral deposits beneath the surface,” Tayzar added, holding up a scanner. “With proper equipment, it could easily be mined and used to create a modest colony.”

Kane nodded. “This world could be useful then, but it will never give much new wealth. Very well, let us go. We will transmit our findings back to the palace, and then proceed to Maraknos.”

They all entered the ship. A few minutes later, it took off, and flew back to the heavens from whence it came. The only trace it had even been there at all was the burn mark left by the engines, and the only people who would ever see that would be any future colonists.

V

In the quarters provided to him in King Gorath’s palace, Lord Faldarian sat deep in thought. It was a frequent habit for him; from the time of his birth, he had sought out knowledge and truth. Over eighty years ago, he had been born in his city to the noble family. He had shown remarkable skill in both learning and diplomacy. Once, in fact, he had come across a group of his fellow children quarrelling over a ball. He had settled the dispute by creating a game that they could all play. He believed that it was still played by children to this day.

He had grown into a young man, and the last war to overthrow Gorath’s line had been fought. There had been several wars over the centuries of recorded history. Sometimes the monarchy had fallen for a time, but always the descendents of Synestra had reasserted their dominance of the people.

In the last war, Faldarian had taken command of an army that defended Gorath’s grandfather. He had seen men literally blown apart in front of him, but had emerged victorious. His generation had rebuilt the world after it had been nearly torn down, only to have their children squander it with a mentality that only did whatever felt good. Gorath’s generation had unfortunately taken after their parents rather than grandparents.

Still, as he grew older, he had been a faithful servant of the crown. He had ruled his city with the king's blessing and had avoided any alliances he didn't need. But he had still been just, and had not exploited his citizens. For he recognized the fatal flaw in secularism; could easily degenerate into anarchy if there wasn't at least some minimum standard of morality that all agreed to live by.

This simple fact had caused him to feel a nagging emptiness, a void, a longing for something he couldn't fully explain. In his later years, he had begun to wonder whether his culture's ideals really had worth or not. What did it matter if he was wealthy and well respected? He would still die anyway. He began to see the futility of life. How could anything matter if it were all temporary anyway?

So, he began to study every philosophy he could find. He had discovered that there were four basic views of religion. The first one was the polytheistic view. This was an ancient system, steeped in superstition, and no longer practiced. Early Xanogar had looked at the forces of nature: air, wind, earth, fire, and so on, and had somehow ascribed their actions to the work of nature gods. Interestingly enough, they couldn't explain where the universe itself came from, for in their belief system, a primordial world already existed, and the gods simply formed through it via some random, undirected process. They then proceeded to give the world its present form, and create the Xanogar.

Morality under this system tended to emphasize active, rather than passive virtues. Strength, courage, and fame were valued over meekness, humility and peace. The idea was to exercise and strengthen every appetite, until perfected. So wars were violent, and worship tended to involve blood sacrifice. Immorality and drunkenness were commonplace in temples out of a twisted desire to bring the impulses into perfection.

And for all that, the final destiny of the souls remained clouded in ambiguity. On one hand, the gods had to be placated in order to avoid their wrath and incur their favor. But on the other hand, there was also the notion that the universe was ruled by fate, which suggested that nothing they did really mattered, because everything was fated anyway.

Faldarian immediately discarded this system, because it couldn't adequately explain the creation and fate of the universe. Moreover, active morality was the only morality truly emphasized, and this was carried to an extreme. So, he looked to the second view for answers.

The second view was pantheism, which was also no longer practiced. In this belief system, the universe began as a 'life force' or universal spirit from which everything came. Apparently, this process of creation was either a mistake, or at the very least, undesirable, for the goal was to extinguish the self. All desires, all passions, indeed all individuality was detached until the only thing left was the 'life force' in them. This 'essence' was then reabsorbed into the main 'life force'. So the fate of everything was to either go back to the primordial form from whence it came, or be destroyed in the end. Thus, passive morality was emphasized here: meekness, peace, and calmness.

Faldarian rejected this belief system as well. For one thing, the beginning and meaning of life made no sense. How could a life force create anything? Creation required conscious intelligent thought. And even if the life force was an intelligent spirit, why would it create things that were against its very nature? And why create free will when the only choices were to be eliminated or reabsorbed? Nothing ultimately came of conscious choice.

Faldarian then turned to modern thought, which most people today held. It was a largely secular form, invented five hundred years ago by an earlier king named Akanton. Akanton's philosophy was frequently summarized into the following parts:

1. All life developed from nonlife. A few of the basic molecules of life condensed together to form an early cell. Then, through mutation and adaption to the environment, it grew to the present creatures.

2. All of life is a struggle for dominance. This is why the instincts for self preservation, violence, and reproduction are so strong.

3. The old moral codes and religions are nothing more than attempts to perfect or control these impulses. Xanogar should leave them and create their own morality. They are quite capable of making their own paradise on Xodos; no need to wait for one in an afterlife.

But even in these beliefs, Faldarian found many flaws. For one thing, life could not have possibly formed on its own. Macromolecules could be mixed together in a beaker, but cells didn't just spontaneously appear. In order to build up and break apart macromolecules, one needed a complete working cell with fully functioning enzymes, themselves complex proteins. Moreover, in order for the organism to develop into another, it would have to mutate in such a way that more genetic information had to be generated. However, all known mutations either resulted in a changed of DNA base pairs, or a loss of genetic information. So, for both of these reasons, spontaneous development of life was biochemically impossible.

Faldarian also questioned the whole notion of secular morality. By eliminating the concept of a hereafter, morality had become more and more nominal until people only served themselves and only helped others when it was convenient or advantageous.

But there was a fourth world view that Faldarian had just begun to study, under the advice of his military commander, a man named Takozan. This was the Creator worship practiced by a small sect of Xanogar. In this system of beliefs, one Creator had actively, consciously formed the world. People and things were created differently because he had a specific purpose for

everything. All fit together to make a unified whole, and he cared for all the same. Thus, all should be respected and cared for.

Furthermore, the Creator worshippers said that he was good. That while allowing them to have free will, he would one day come back and offer his people the chance to return to him. That one day, he would restore the world to the perfection of old.

Faldarian was forced to admit that he found this final world view the most logical. It made sense of life's origins and purpose, and also explained why morality had value in the first place. However, he still felt like he needed more proof. The Creator's return had been foretold by Synestra, and was believed to be swiftly approaching.

He pulled out a journal, and began to peruse its contents. They held similar thoughts to the ones in his head.

There are four different religions/ worldviews. So also, there are three forms of government, rule by the many, termed democracy, rule by the few, termed aristocracy, and rule by the one, monarchy. There are also two forms of economics. Capitalism, where commerce is in the hands of the people with as few regulations imposed as possible to ensure overall fairness, and socialism,. Where the rulers own and administer the same.

Thus these three things, ideology, government, and economics are the backbone of all city states and nations. These three things are what nations and peoples quarrel over and go to war over. Usually, a combination of them will spark conflict, as it seems to be Xanogar nature to judge differences to be insults or threats. Still, while it is true that wars are fought over ideals, rarely will they be fought if not also for power and wealth.

All possible combinations of government and economics have been tried in antiquity. All have both good and bad examples and successes and failures in history. It is difficult to say which

is best. There are those who will champion one policy or one statesman or another, looking for a savior in them.

Yet it seems that any civilization will rise and fall not so much on its structure as on the character of its people. If the people are good and willing to cooperate with one another, then it matters little how they organize themselves. For their goal will ever be the common good. On the other hand, if the people are bad, then no matter how they are organized, they will ever seek ill gotten gain and power over their neighbor.

So once more, one must turn to worldview, and find that one which is good and true. All religions, worldviews, philosophies and movements have four basic members. There is the hypocrite, the nominal member, the fanatic, and the genuine. The first is self explanatory. The second takes the name, and may occasionally attend the traditional services, but little else. The fanatic is one who not only has strong convictions, but also will use intimidation and violence to force his views on the unwilling. The fourth has strong beliefs, but also has benevolence. He will defend his positions peacefully, and will only be harsh with himself. He will seek to do his best in all things.

The key to learning the truth of a worldview is to both analyze its original texts and its earliest genuine members.

There are three subjects that seek to explain the world. They are science, philosophy, and religion. To be sure, there are many other subjects worthy of study, such as art, literature, and language, but these seek to enrich life more than explain it. Science relies on experience first, followed by reason, and perhaps even some faith. In particular, it relies on the experiences of observation and repeated experiment. Philosophy relies on reason first, followed by experience and faith. It seeks to examine the mind itself, whence it comes, how it acquires knowledge, and whether said knowledge is an accurate picture of the external world. Religion relies on faith,

followed by reason and experience. These three subjects all need to be studied in order to get a clear and complete worldview. Faith, reason, and experience are neither the same thing nor are they contradictory things. They must be embraced in a complementary manner in order to arrive at truth.

Footsteps announced the coming of someone at his door, and he snapped out of his deep thinking. Sure enough, it was Takozan.

“I will be returning to our city soon, my lord,” he announced. “As you instructed me, I will see to the administration in your absence, while you remain here with King Gorath.”

“Very well,” Faldarian replied. He indicated his journal. “I have been thinking much about your faith, Takozan. I know you worship the Creator, and feel that he will come to Xodos one day.”

“Our ancestors foretold his coming around this time, master,” Takozan answered. “Are you beginning to lean towards belief in him yourself?”

“Perhaps. But I cannot believe just yet. I need more; I need a sign.” Faldarian shook his head. “And some would say that faith is merely belief in what you know is impossible.”

Takozan didn’t take offense, but he did shake his head adamantly. “No. I do not believe that. That is mere self-delusion; faith believes the uncertain. Constantly reaching for the Creator, despite not knowing all. Do you wish for such faith, my lord?”

Faldarian looked at him briefly, and then looked out the window, as if hesitant to meet his servant’s gaze. “I want answers, Takozan. And I won’t rest until I have them.”

“If I may, my lord, you seem to approach the whole matter as if it were a subject in the university. Yes, that may help strengthen faith, but the Creator ultimately is no subject. He is a Being, one who desires relationship with his creations.”

“Yes, so you have said,” Faldarian answered. “Yet, forgive me, but when people speak of ‘relationships’ it calls to mind all those saccharine sweet, hokey, and shallow love songs that silly young women adore, and which I have nothing but scorn for.”

Takozan chuckled. “No, I don’t enjoy them either, but for different reasons. They present love and relationship as mere sweet feelings, when the real thing is something much tougher, more the act of will. At any rate, when my father fell in love with my mother, he told me that he didn’t feel any melodrama. It was something quieter, but stronger and deeper. Like all was right with the world.”

“Would that were so.”

“Well, to be fair, maybe loving relationships are like that for some. Relationships are different for different people. Two brothers probably have similar, but still different relationships with both their father and each other.”

Takozan looked intently at his lord. “But relationships still must have a clear beginning. And that beginning for the Creator is the active giving of yourself to Him.”

VI

The spaceship was steadily approaching the second moon. Swirling reddish-orange clouds hid the surface from view, but they already knew from their probes that the surface was covered with thick jungle. It was also much warmer than Dakari, owing to the clouds trapping the sun’s heat for prolonged periods of time.

Tarok flew the ship into the atmosphere. Their view was clouded with mist, but he knew where he was going. As they descended, the ship rocked slightly, forcing General Kane to give his pilot a look.

“Only turbulence, sir,” Tarok assured him.

“Find a suitable place to land when we come to the surface,” Kane said.

Gradually, the cloud layer thinned out, and they got a look at the thick jungle below. Between the treetops and the clouds, the sky shone a bright orange in the twilight hours, but the sun couldn’t be seen for the clouds thickness.

As they looked along the landscape, they could see a river with black liquid leading up to a dark mountain on the horizon. They squinted, and thought that shadows could be seen moving along the river. The general pointed, and Tarok activated a magnifier on the view port. However, whenever they tried to get a close up of one of the shadows, nothing could be seen.

Tarok supposed that it was some type of optical illusion, but for some reason, felt a sense of dread. Almost panic, as if what was on the surface was something dangerous or wrong. He had no reason to feel this, yet he did, and hoped that they wouldn’t have to land on the surface.

Tarok flew several hundred feet over the canopy, looking for a break in the dense growth. There were none large enough for the ship, so he kept moving. Half an hour passed, and they still found nothing. Kane shook his head in disgust and hit the intercom button.

“Everyone report to the bridge immediately,” he said. When they all came in, they faced Kane behind Tarok, who was still flying the ship. He could hear everything that was said, but he couldn’t turn around.

“We won’t be landing here,” he announced. “Because there is no clearing large enough to land in, we will just make one more circling and then head to Kayraan. If you want to see the planet, take a look now.”

“Perhaps it is just as well,” Mordrak offered. “Undoubtedly, we will develop the other moon long before we come here again.”

“Yes, this moon will probably never be significant,” Kane agreed. “Tarok, take us out of here.”

Tarok piloted the ship back up into the clouds.

Later, Tarok put the ship on auto pilot and assembled with the rest of the crew in the central part of the ship. Apart from the bridge, engineering, and quarters for personnel and supplies, the bulk of the ship was dedicated to a garden space and hibernation chambers. Both were experiments to determine how plants would grow under artificial gravity and whether people could be kept unconscious for long periods of time to conserve resources.

Botanists were already planting seeds into the garden beds, as Kane addressed the remainder of the crew.

“It will take a few weeks to make the long arc between the second and third moons,” he informed them. “So now is the time to conduct some research on the conditions of life in space over a longer term. Behind me, we are seeing if there are any negative effects with artificial gravity on agriculture. The remainder of the civilian crew will be required to enter the hibernation chambers and be put to sleep for several days.

“They will use a variant of the chemicals used for anesthesia to reduce your vital signs to minimal function. You will be monitored by me, General Mordrak, and the remaining military officers, all of which have been trained for both this task and the task of piloting should that need arise.”

The general looked pointedly at Tarok. The younger pilot hadn't realized that this was part of the mission, but should've known. Space flight was too dangerous to leave in the hands of just one man, so it made sense that other pilots would be among the soldiers. Furthermore, the two generals would never trust the other, so it fell to the civilian crew to be the subjects of the experiments.

That seemed to occur to Tayzar as well, for he opened his mouth to protest. General held up a hand to forestall any argument, and two of the soldiers casually touched their wrist lasers. The mechanic shut his mouth, knowing that they were being ordered, and not petitioned.

Tarok shrugged, tried to look casual despite his unease, and walked over to a chamber. Tayzar, Elnara, and the other civilians followed suit, except for the botanists lucky enough to have another assignment. He allowed himself to be helped in, hooked up to vital monitors, and have the chamber door shut. He was locked in, but at least it was clear so that he could see.

Slowly, he drifted off to sleep, and for a time, knew nothing.

He awoke slowly, fuzzily, and at first didn't know where he was or who he was. A radio patched in a voice.

"Pilot Tarok, do you hear me?" a familiar voice asked.

It took him a minute to remember that that was his name. Weakly, he nodded.

"This is General Kane. You are the royal pilot for King Gorath, on the first manned flight into space. Do you remember?"

He opened his mouth, which was uncomfortably dry. "Yes," he managed to rasp.

“Good.” The clear door opened, and he felt arms unhook wires from him before seating him up. He looked to either side, and saw a man and a woman. It took him several minutes before he remembered their names. Tayzar and Elnara.

Elnara, meanwhile, had placed a cool glass of water into his hands, and he sipped slowly. Blinking several times, he looked around to see other chambers with other people being helped out. Evidently he was the last one. Behind his friends, he saw a garden with plant seedlings pushing through the soil. Slowly, the mission and the events of it came back to him.

Tayzar helped him out of the chamber, and he staggered to his feet. As he walked, unsteadily at first, and then with more confidence, the past gradually returned to him, beginning with the most recent events and going back to his earliest memories.

General Kane stood nearby, watching him. “I take it you have no memory problems?” he asked. “There’s some confusion at first, but that seems to go away in time.”

“I’m all right, general,” he said.

“Very well. You have been asleep for two weeks, along with the others. In another day, we will be at the place where our space probes have tried to intercept the third moon. I will need everyone ready to address that situation as it becomes further known.”

The next day, they came upon a strange sight. Several space probes, like the one that had landed on the nearer moons, were floating before them. They were all drifting aimlessly, but very close together, as if they had stopped at essentially the same point.

“Move in closely, Tarok,” Kane ordered, standing up to leave. “I am going to have them bring in one of those probes. Maybe we can find out what stopped them.”

Tarok nodded, and slowed the ship just enough to bring it up next to the floating graveyard. Pressing another control, he opened a hatch near the middle of the hull. A mechanical arm reached out, grabbed one of the probes, and came back in, carrying the probe with it.

In the cargo hold, Kane stood with Tayzar and Elnara as the probe was passed through the airlock. They found no dents or evidenced that the probe had been hit by anything. Opening the access hatch, they found no crossed wires either. Nothing had affected the circuitry, and the power pack, while drained, was intact.

“Nothing, general,” Tayzar confirmed. “The probe ran out of power before it could get close enough to Kayraan to begin recording. I wouldn’t be surprised to find the same thing wrong with all the others.”

“They must simply not have enough power to get this far away on their own, sir,” Elnara agreed. “Flawed design, that’s all.”

Kane nodded. “Then recharge it, and send it back out,” he ordered. “I want to know what to expect before we reach the far moon.”

The repairmen pulled a wire out of an access hatch in the nearest wall. Hooking it up to an end of the probe, they pressed a button and the probe began to light up as it received power. Kane walked up to the cockpit to see the probe launch.

A moment later, he could see the arm release the probe. It began to drift away peacefully.

“Tarok, are you getting any readings from the probe?” he asked.

“Yes sir, I…” Tarok began, but before he could say more, the lights on the probe darkened, and it began drifting once again.

“Sir…this is very strange, but…the probe is out of power again,” Tarok stammered nervously.

“What? That’s impossible!” Kane protested. “I just saw them fully recharge it.”

“Yes, sir. But I’m reading that it’s as dead as the others,” Tarok answered sheepishly.

Kane looked as if we were deciding what to do next. “Continue the present course, then,” he said at last.

Tarok looked at him, not sure whether that was a good idea. He had a bad feeling about it. “Um, sir, are you sure that’s wise?” he asked. After all, the probe had been fully charged when it left.

“Do it!” Kane snapped.

Reluctantly, he did so. As they passed the probes, he felt himself tense up, expecting the ship to shut down any minute, killing them instantly. But the power didn’t so much as flicker and he let out a sigh of relief. The ship continued to move steadily to the distant moon.

Elsewhere, it was nightfall. A darkened balcony looked out over a peaceful sea. The sole occupant looked at the walls of rock that surrounded the island his palace was sitting on. A hundred foot crack in the rocks was all that connected the island to the rest of the ocean.

Although the night hid the figure from view, he was deep in thought. A great change was about to happen, one that would spell the end of the world as his people knew it. Yet, it had to be, or no greater good would ever come.

“And now, the great trials begin,” he said softly to himself. “The other world draws near, and much suffering will follow, for them, and especially for me. Yet, it must be so, for only then shall they be saved. And one day, their world shall be brought out of darkness.”

VI

In Synestra, a shuttle flew from the palace towards a newly constructed spaceport and factory at the edge of the city limits. As the shuttle passed over the factory, its sole occupant looked over the industrial wasteland. Workers were scrambling around a large cigar shaped warship composed of black armor. Robots that resembled claws on stilts were carrying metal plates to workers who were welding them to the multiple gun turrets that lined the starship hull.

Beyond the shipyards was a box – shaped factory surrounded by smokestacks that spewed pollution out into space. Behind this was a junk yard of old and defective parts that were being carried to a nearby melting pit by more workers and helper robots.

A miserable place to be sure, Lord Faldarian thought as he piloted the shuttle to the factory's docking bay. Only built months ago, and yet it has already left its mark.

The place bothered him, especially because of the larger construction project. Why would King Gorath need such a ship? Yes, there were always wars and rumors of wars, but the last few decades had been relatively peaceful. Crime was always a problem, but there were no real attempts to overthrow the king. Indeed, patriotism seemed at an all time high; people were excited by the prospects of space, and treasures to be found in the stars. Still, he had a nagging suspicion that something was amiss, something even more pressing than his philosophical wonderings. Or perhaps, connected with it.

Faldarian frowned as he landed and exited his shuttle. Where had that thought come from? He wondered. It had just seemed to come out of nowhere. Yet, it was there, as if put into his mind by some force just outside of his perception. He felt that he would need to watch events very carefully, if he was to have any of his questions answered, tangible or intangible.

He stretched before continuing, and began his trek through the factory, ignoring both the heat and the workers manning the assembly lines. He walked down a narrow corridor, and found himself in a large supply room. A conveyor belt was unloading Star Crystals, while Gorath and Zyndatha were inspecting them. Gorath picked up a Star Crystal and held it at arm's length.

"Beautiful aren't they, Lord Zyndatha?" he remarked. "It is through these that the kingdom will return to the glory days of old."

"I trust the crystals are satisfactory, Your Excellency?" Zyndatha asked, wanting assurance of his own part in their shared venture.

Gorath replaced the conveyor belt, smiling slightly. It was the exact reaction he had been expecting from his colleague. He was a self-centered one, driven by wealth, having gotten rich manufacturing electronics. But he was militarily weak, and required the protection of a stronger benefactor, hence his loyalty to Gorath.

"They will enable our ships to fly; that is all that matters," Gorath told him.

"Yes, my lord."

"You have my latest order. I require a steady supply of ships to maintain peace in the kingdom."

"I will oversee the order myself."

Faldarian came up to them, and bowed respectfully.

"My lords," he greeted.

"Ah, Lord Faldarian. Good," Gorath said. "I wish you to take a shipment of Star Crystals to your city and have them installed into a squadron of your air shuttles."

“I received your transmission this morning,” Faldarian said. “But why? And why me personally? With respect, it doesn’t seem like a task for anyone other than a regular pilot.”

“Trust is not something we can afford,” Gorath said. “I still don’t know how people will react to the building up of our forces. So far they obey, but opinions can change. If there is any trouble in the factory, I want a contingency. So, while most of the new ships will remain here, some of them will be with you, since you can be trusted.”

“Thank you, Lord. But I still don’t understand. Why do you seek to build up the military?”

Gorath looked out a window at the city below. “Moving forward sometimes requires force, my lord,” he replied.

Faldarian didn’t answer, but felt his uneasiness rising.

Tarok looked on in amazement, as he caught his first glance of the distant moon. It was a beautiful blue- green sphere, with swirling white clouds. Mostly ocean, it had a few large continents with several islands scattered here and there.

“What do the scanners tell us about it?” Kane asked.

Tarok looked at the sensors, then back with a confused look. “Sir, they show us nothing,” he answered.

“Nothing?” the general repeated, beginning to get more than a little annoyed. “What is this? First the probes, and now our own equipment? You can see the planet there yourself.”

“Yes, sir. But all my instruments say that there is nothing but rock.”

Kane sighed. What doesn't want to be found there? He wondered. Looking at his pilot, he said "Fly low, and land near the beach areas."

Tarok did as he was told, and the ship flew into the atmosphere. Once the clouds cleared, he was confronted by a landscape of mountain and forest. The sky was a vibrant blue, and a gentle wind set the treetops in a dreamlike sway.

Tarok heard footsteps, and he spared a quick glance over his shoulder to see the others file in. They all stood, mesmerized at the view. It was, without a doubt, the most beautiful place any of them had ever seen.

The forests were teeming with life, but not choked up with it as the second moon had been. The trees climbed up to the mountains at a given point, then gave way to rock. The valleys between the mountains were carved masterpieces of unspoiled nature. The whole view made Xodos look quite dead by comparison.

Presently, they saw the coastline, and Tarok brought the shuttle in for a landing. Then, he shut the engine off, and stood up to join the others. Kane continued to stare outside for a few more minutes, before turning around himself.

"We will leave two people to stay with the ship. The rest of us will scout around for a few hours. But we will stay together."

"On the first moon, general, we were permitted to go out on our own," Mordrak protested.

"Because we knew nothing was there," Kane replied firmly. "Here we don't know what to expect, so we stay together."

He turned to Tayzar and Elnara. "You two will stay on the ship," he decided. "Since you are the only ones who could repair any damage, you are the last people I want hurt."

“But if that is the case, then why do you take the pilot?” Tayzar asked. He glared slightly at Tarok, who shrugged helplessly. It hadn’t been his choice.

Kane’s eyes narrowed, and he looked at both Tarok and Mordrak. “They are the only others whom King Gorath selected for the mission. I can trust my own men, I don’t fear you, but these two I’m still not sure about.”

“Sir, have I done anything amiss?” Tarok asked.

“You questioned my orders at the space probes.”

Mordrak snorted. “Why don’t you just say you want to ensure you stay in charge and be done with it?”

“I am in charge,” Kane answered. He walked up to Mordrak. “And I intend to stay that way. You and the pilot will stay in my sight. Is that clear?”

The two generals glowered at each other for a minute, and Tarok held his breath. This was exactly what he feared. The secular did have the tendency to let their ambitions get in the way of their better judgment.

“All is clear, general,” Mordrak said at last. “Shall we proceed?”

Kane frowned one more time, but nodded curtly. Tayzar and Elnara looked down, disappointed. They were suspecting that Kane was partially blaming them for the failed probe.

The general opened the hatch, and all the others filed out. Tarok felt the soft, warm sand on his ankles as they walked to the shoreline. A gentle breeze was in their face, and the sun shone down brightly. Overall, the moon was very warm, much warmer than Xodos. But it was still pleasing, like a pleasant summer when there wasn’t so much ice and snow.

They walked along the beach, not saying anything, feeling the gentle waves wash away the sand that kept getting stuck to their boots. The sand gave way to rock the further inland one looked, and the forest began rather abruptly, as if planted there by gardeners. They looked into the woods to try and get a glimpse of any animal life. But nothing stirred, except maybe the strange birds over the treetops, jostling the branches.

They heard a splash, and several roars from the beach. Whirling around, they saw a bizarre sight. A gelatin- like creature with tentacles was flying through the water, being chased by several green scaly creatures. They had three eyes and four arms equipped with razor sharp claws. The lizards were chasing the gel creature through the water to the beach itself, making the Xanogar run to the forests edge. The lizards could move with amazing speed, and they quickly tore into the creature, killing it with deadly precision. Then, they dragged it to shore and began eating it.

Kane fumbled with something in his sleeves. The others looked surprised when he pulled out a wrist laser, one of the more sophisticated personal weapons. He pointed it at the monsters, but Mordrak put his hand on his arm.

“That might not be necessary,” he said. “The creatures appear similar to the ice lizards of Xodos, and they are probably much slower on land than in the water. Besides, they probably didn’t see us.”

I won’t take that chance,” Kane answered. Aiming carefully, he began to shoot at the creatures, causing them to rear up in surprise and terror, and consequently disappear back into the water. The indeed moved much slower on land and they made their way back more sluggishly.

The Xanogar all looked at each other for a moment. Then, they went back to the beach, inspected the half eaten creature, and continued on their way.

Heading down the beach, they walked in silence, not sure what to expect. They had already seen more life here than on the other moons of Xodos. Tarok still wondered, though. First, the mysterious probe malfunction, and now this. He was beginning to wonder what it all foreshadowed.

His thoughts were cut off by another series of roars, stopping them in their tracks. Several hundred feet away, another set of the lizards were gathered together. Kane held out his arms, signaling them to stop where they were.

They heard a galloping sound in the distance, and looked into the forest. A hoofed beast with coral like skin ran through the forest. But the animal was not what caught their attention.

This creature had a rider.

It was a woman, standing about seven feet tall, and extremely slender. But her body was well-toned and muscular, so she was clearly not in ill health. Her form was essentially the same as Xanogar, except that her skin was golden, and her fingers had small non-retractable claws. She had a small mouth and nose, large colorless eyes, and shoulder length hair that was black and straight. She wore a simple brown tunic and carried a metal dagger, so they knew that this was a civilized life form, and not another beast.

Tarok stood transfixed, amazed at what they had just discovered. There was another intelligent race in the system. He wondered if they were somehow responsible for the inability to scan.

But the odd thing about that was that they had seen no cities or technology. Furthermore, this young woman had nothing on her person that looked even remotely electronic. She rode her strange beast of burden alongside the lizards, herding them along the beach.

Then she caught sight of the strange intruders. She instantly rode in front of her ‘flock’ to halt them, and looked in their direction warily. There was no mistaking the unease and confusion in her face.

Kane slowly approached her, after signaling the others to stay back. The riding beast reared up, and the woman calmed it. But as he got closer, the unease in her eyes gave way to fear, and she waved the lizards back into the ocean. Then, she turned her beast back around and galloped back into the forest.

The others came up to the general. Tarok spoke first. “I can’t believe it. Another people in our star system, and we never knew.”

“I hope we haven’t made a bad first impression,” Mordrak ventured, still expressing hostility to Kane.

“Why should we have?” Kane asked in such a tone as to silence further questioning of his actions. “I did nothing threatening. But come; we will need to follow her and establish some kind of relationship.”

“Perhaps we should not carry weapons, general,” another soldier offered.

“No, I’m keeping the wrist laser. We don’t know yet whether they are hostile,” Kane retorted.

They left the beach and walked into the forest. It was somewhat darker in there, as the branches filtered out the sunlight. Following the tracks, the Xanogar found themselves on a well-beaten path that led them further and further from the beach. Overhead, the birds flew to and from their nests, singing their eerie, haunting songs.

A rustle was heard in the bushes, and Kane whirled around so fast, he made the others jump. He pointed his wrist laser around wildly, looking for a sign. He saw none, but that failed to relax him.

“I know you are there,” he called out. “Come into the open, and let us speak.”

Then, they came out of the bushes, dozens of the alien people, male and female, young and old, some mounted on the strange beasts and others walking on foot. Tarok saw the woman ride up to them, followed by another mount, this one carrying a man. He had a grey beard, graying hair, and piercing eyes, but seemed kindly, almost fatherly, although Kane didn’t let himself relax for even a second. For the man also carried a metal broadsword at his side.

Then, adding further mystery to the planet, the woman spoke. “Here they are, Liion,” she said. “The strange creatures I just told you about.”

“So they are, Miranda, so they are,” he replied. “Who are you? Where do you come from?”

They just looked at the aliens in shock. They understood what the man said perfectly, for he had just spoken fluent Xanogar.

VIII

The Xanogar looked with disbelief at the alien’s words. For a moment, the two different groups of people just stood and stared at each other. Kane broke the silence first.

“I am general Kane of Xodos,” he said, standing in front of the others. “We greet you. Tell me, how do you know our language?”

“I am Liion,” the man replied. “I am the leader and father of Harzhan’s children. I know not what you mean by ‘your language.’ We speak the language given us, no more, no less. It is the tongue of all people in the entire world.”

“We come not from your world, but another faraway one,” Kane replied. “Our people, whom we call Xanogar, speak as you do.” He pointed to his men as he spoke.

“I see not why it would be otherwise,” a young alien man answered.

“Perhaps, Kor, but these men may not be as we are,” the woman, Miranda, replied.

“It seems that Harzhan speaks the same to all, though,” Liion said.

That last statement puzzled Kane. It was the second time the term Harzhan was used, so he asked about it.

“You don’t know?” Liion said, with a confused frown. “But all know him.”

“We do not,” Kane answered.

“Harzhan is lord and master over all,” Liion said.

“Your king, then?”

“You may say that.”

“I see,” Kane said thoughtfully. “Tell me, how would I go about seeing him?”

Liion shrugged, as if it made no difference. “Harzhan summons us as he will. Or sometimes, he comes to us in person. But if you wish, you may come with us to our city. We will provide steeds for you.” He indicated the beasts of burden.

Kane and the others looked at each other for a moment. “We have travelled far today,” Kane said after a moment. “Perhaps tomorrow, that is if we can trust you.”

“I don’t understand,” Liion answered.

“You will forgive me, but I don’t know yet whether you lie about your intentions,” Kane replied.

Tarok stiffened slightly, and fought the urge to admonish the general. After all, this was their first contact with these people. It would not do to offend them.

But instead of being offended, the chieftain only looked more puzzled. “I do not know that word. What is ‘lie’?”

Now Kane adopted a confused look. He had never had to define such an easy term before. “It means to intentionally say something that is not true,” he explained, wondering how a grown man could possibly not know something so simple.

“Why would I do that?” Liion asked.

“If it were to your advantage, perhaps,” Kane suggested, narrowing his eye somewhat.

“I don’t understand you, Kane. How would anyone be better off if people went around ‘lying’ as you call it? That sounds like a way to become tainted. Harzhan has warned us that that must not happen.”

“Forget it,” Kane said, beginning to sound irritated. He was beginning to suspect the chief of having substandard intelligence. “We will return to our ship on the beach. Come for us in the morning.”

“Very well, strange one,” Liion said. “We go now.”

“Before you leave, should we watch for any wild animals?” Kane asked.

“You saw the lizards I was herding,” Miranda said. “But they are slow on land, and are only hostile to the jellyfish they eat.”

“Any other animals?”

“Only the wild hounds of the forests, which we hunt for food. But they will not harm you.”

“Any other cities besides yours?”

“None nearby, but I assure you, you would have no more to fear from them than from us,” Liion answered. He looked at Kane then, as if he were finally beginning to understand the alien general better.

“You are a highly suspicious man, Kane,” he decided. Then he reached out, and clasped Kane’s shoulder. Kane bristled, and the others from Xodos recoiled slightly themselves. None of them would have ever touched their superior like that. But it was clear from his face that Liion meant no disrespect. Indeed, he seemed to almost pity the general.

He took his hand from a clearly uncomfortable Kane, and rode off into the woods. The others followed, leaving the search party alone. They waited for Kane to give them their next orders. Eventually, he turned to look back at them.

“Come along,” he said stiffly. “I suppose we should get back to the ship and rest. It has been a long journey.”

“Yes,” Mordrak spoke up. “And we must report this to the palace immediately. To think, that we have made such a…”

“No,” Kane cut him off. “No transmissions just yet. Let us find out what we’re really dealing with first.”

“We’re not going to report?”

“Think about it, General Mordrak,” Kane retorted, perhaps still recoiling from the discovery himself. “What do you think people will do once they find out that there are other people in the universe besides themselves? How do you think they will react? With fear? With shaken faith in themselves? No; we need to take things very slowly. I won’t start a panic back home over nothing. That’s an order; no one is to contact Xodos except for me.”

“Yes sir,” Mordrak muttered after a moment’s hesitation.

They walked out of the woods to the beach, and began the long trek down the seashore back to the ship. None of them said anything, leaving Tarok alone with his own thoughts. Another race of men. It did indeed call into question his own view of the world. He had always thought that the Creator had created the Xanogar as his sole subjects. Yet, given that there were others in the universe, that was clearly not so. For indeed, anything or anyone they would find would have to come from the Creator, for definition, he was maker of all.

It could be argued either way, he mused. Those who didn’t believe in the Creator would say that multitudes of life proved that life was simply a natural product of existence. Creator worshippers, on the other hand, would say that the more life there was the more proof of the Creator there was since life couldn’t spontaneously generate. Tarok concluded that the presence of the Kayraan people really didn’t change beliefs, but would be interpreted by every individual in the terms of the beliefs they already had. Still, since they were no longer unique, they would have more to think about.

“They must be a simple people,” Kane muttered, walking close beside him.

“Sir?” Tarok asked, breaking out of his wonderings.

“You saw them,” Kane said, somewhat annoyed. “It may be too early to tell, but I would almost call them stupid.”

“I saw no evidence of that, general,” he protested. He inexplicably felt compelled to defend them. “As you said, it’s too early to judge, but I found them to be quite likable.”

“That chief of theirs, that Liion, didn’t understand half of what I told him,” Kane complained. “I had to explain to him what a lie was, something as simple as that! A child knows what that is.”

“With respect, sir, I would not take that as evidence of stupidity,” Tarok insisted.

“Oh? And what would you call it, pilot?” Kane asked, sourly.

“Innocence,” Tarok said, thinking about the people, and their kind, honest faces. “I would say that.”

“Innocence?” the general repeated, scornfully, rolling his eyes in disdain. “Innocence? No one is innocent, pilot. All are guilty of something; even youth know how to lie and cheat to their advantage.”

He then stopped talking, and Tarok, picking up on the silent cue, said no more. The others had, of course, heard the entire conversation, but kept their own thoughts to themselves. Presently, they reached their ship, and after telling Tayzar and Elnara about the aliens, they went to sleep. Tarok himself sat in his pilot’s chair, which was larger and more comfortable than any of the bunks. Leaning back, he watched the waves crash against the shore. As he relaxed, he realized that they still knew very little about their situation.

It was still unknown how or why the space probes had shown them none of this. Or how it was that the aliens spoke Xanogar without even knowing about them. And yet, somehow, Tarok sensed that the answers lay with Harzhan, their mysterious king.

Who is he? Tarok wondered. Or for that matter, what? It almost seemed that the aliens regarded him as more than a king. Indeed, he himself already felt somewhat in awe of him. Then, before he could think any more of it, he fell asleep. It had, after all, been a very long day.

IX

They all slept well into the morning. It was almost noon before they awoke, roused by a faint tapping on the airlock. General Kane came into the cockpit and activated the alarm, raising Tarok out of sleep. He sat up so fast that he banged his head on the ceiling.

“Sorry,” Kane said, as the pilot rubbed his forehead. “But it is time for us to go. The aliens have arrived.”

They all gathered in the hallway as Kane opened the airlock and led them out. Liion and Miranda stood there with their mounts. Behind them were fifteen other mounted riders.

“Good morning,” Liion greeted them. “I apologize if I woke you up, but I don’t know your habits. We have been up for several hours already.”

“It is all right,” Kane assured them. “Shall we be off?”

“Yes. I have a rider here for each of your men. The horses are strong enough to carry two. You may ride with me.”

“Very well. My pilot, Tarok, will ride with your mate. The others with whomever they want.”

The others paired up with each of the aliens. Miranda climbed onto her horse and extended her hand to help Tarok up.

“Thank you,” Tarok said.

“You’re welcome, Tarok is it?” she asked. “Hold onto my shoulders; the animals are fast.”

Tarok and the others did as they were told, and then the mounts took off. They made it from the beach to the edge of the woods in a relatively short time. Then, they ran quickly between the trees towards a mountain peak off in the distance.

“Liion,” Kane said, after thinking to himself for a moment.

“Yes?” he replied, not turning back.

“How did you know that there were fifteen of us? I had left two of my people on the ship yesterday. And yet, you had enough for us all. How so?”

“I didn’t know,” Liion replied. “Harzhan compelled me to do so.”

“How did he know?”

“He knows all, and sees into the hearts of all. How could he not?”

Kane was confused by this. “Wait. I thought you said Harzhan was your king.”

“Yes. He is king over all,” Liion agreed. “He lives in a palace on an island far from here.”

“Is he one of you?”

“Oh no. Sometimes he appears as one, though. Other times, like last night, his voice simply enters your head to instruct you. That was how I knew your true number.”

“Is Harzhan one of your nature gods, then?” Kane guessed.

“He is over all creation,” Liion answered. “There are no other gods. How could there possibly be one greater than the greatest?”

“There are some of my people back home who believe in such things. But most practice a more developed religion where gods are eliminated and virtues is acquired for the self,” Kane explained.

Tarok flinched as he heard this. Nonbelievers in his religion did say that it was just an attempt to deal with fear of death and natural phenomena. Tarok, however, saw secular thought as little more than thinly veiled arrogance.

Liion seemed to be thinking this as well, for he shook his head in disagreement. “I mean no offence, Kane,” he said. “But while improving yourself seems all well and good, it also seems wrong to forget your purpose. Harzhan created us to serve as caretakers of his world, and separated us from the animals by giving us our minds and free will. All are equal under his eyes, and all exist for his sake, not our own. Without Harzhan creating us to be virtuous servants, why bother getting virtue at all?”

“Because it is advantageous to do so,” Kane said.

“That sounds more selfish than good,” Liion answered.

Kane was stunned into silence for several moments. He had not expected such an insightful comment from him. Especially since he had just convinced himself that they were stupid. Now he began to wonder if they were; perhaps the aliens were just very ignorant.

He saw some of his people on the other mounts watching him to see how he would answer. Figuring he had to say something, he replied. “Well, I suppose it is a matter of opinion.”

“Perhaps,” Liion said. “But I would still rather serve one who can help me than rely solely on my own devices.”

They rode in silence for several minutes, until reaching a city. They saw what appeared to be a mountain in the distance, but was in fact a stone fortress. The main portion was hexagonal in shape, and a central tower sprouted from the middle, reaching hundreds of feet high. Around this, they could see the buildings and streets of the city. There was a forge nearby where alien workers were making tools from the mountain ore. Again, nothing to suggest technology above an Iron Age level.

“We mine the rock from a nearby quarry and use it to build the buildings in the city,” Liion explained.

As the mounts entered the gates, aliens began coming out to see the Xanogar visitors. The mounts had barely enough room to get through to the stables where the Xanogar dropped from their animals and faced the crowd.

Liion stood before his people. “Here are the new ones, come from a world not our own,” he said loudly. “Come forward and welcome them.”

The Xanogar found themselves at the front of several lines of aliens. Although clearly curious about them, the aliens nevertheless shook hands and clasped their visitors on the shoulders. The people of Xodos exchanged pleasantries with some hesitation; they didn’t usually have this much physical contact.

“Bring food for our guests,” Liion said when the hundreds of aliens had greeted them. “Prepare a feast and bring it to the central tower.”

He led the Xanogar through the rows of dwellings to the tower in the center of the city. They entered it to find a large banquet hall with a large bonfire burning in the corner. As other aliens brought wood form another direction and hurled it on the fire, Liion sat down at one of the tables. He motioned for the Xanogar to follow.

“Because you are guests, you need not help with the preparation,” Liion said when they were seated. “We will have food for you shortly. I don’t know what you eat back home, but I hope roast hound will be acceptable.”

A group of the aliens came into the clearing. Each pair carried a skinned animal, resembling a wolf with a boar’s head, and hurled it on the fire. The smell of cooking meat filled the air, and Liion sniffed it fondly. Another group of cooks carrying metal utensils came in and began to cut the meat into smaller pieces. As they did this, they knelt down and looked towards the ground. It took Kane and the others a few minutes to realize that they were offering their thanks to Lord Harzhan.

After a few minutes, one of the cooks walked up. He had light brown hair and an honest face. “The meal is ready, father,” he said to Liion.

“Thank you, Kalgar,” Liion answered.

“Your son?” Kane asked.

Liion blinked. “Yes. They are all mine and Miranda’s children,” he replied. “Or grandchildren, or many times great grandchildren.”

Kane looked around at the large crowd in surprise. “Wait. All of them? How could you have so many?”

Liion shrugged. “Harzhan blesses us or our children with children of their own as he will. It does not happen often, but we love them all dearly.”

Kalgar left the hall, and when he returned, the rest of the large village followed him in. They all sat down as the cooks began passing out the food. Miranda sat down next to her husband, with Kalgar and Kor, the one who had spoken up yesterday. Upon seeing him closer, the Xanogar could

see that he had a shaved head and pointed goatee that gave him a devilish, almost conniving look.

When the food and water was passed out, they all looked to Liion. He stood up, and raised his arms skyward.

“Thank you, Harzhan, for all you have given,” he said loudly. Then he sat down to eat. The enormous family of Liion spoke with the Xanogar. Tarok found both Miranda and Kalgar to be very friendly. Kor was a quieter man, who listened more than spoke, but still addressed Tarok respectfully.

When the meals were mostly eaten, the cooks brought forward a huge stone flask. The aliens stood and walked over to it with their cups, and the Xanogar followed, curious as to what was happening. One of them was using a ladle to transfer liquid from the flask into the extended cups of those first in line. Then they got out of the way, and the others lined up to get their ladle full.

Kane sniffed at his cup warily, and his eye widened somewhat. “This is fermented,” he told Liion. “Alcoholic.”

Liion nodded. “We always have one drink at midday, no more any less. Harzhan says that a little is healthy, but too much would mean becoming tainted.”

“Your Harzhan seems to give you many rules,” the general commented. “It almost seems like he limits your freedom.”

“He seeks to protects us from harm, or becoming tainted,” Liion answered, swallowing his drink in one gulp. “I don’t know ‘freedom’. Is that the opposite of protection?”

“In a sense, yes,” Kane answered. “Do not misunderstand; I don’t mean a lack of order when I say freedom. That benefits nobody. What I mean is that you may do whatever you wish, without another telling you what to do. Even if their intentions are supposedly noble.”

“Hmm.” Liion paused for a moment. “But why would anyone choose to become tainted?”

“I don’t mean…” Kane began. Then he shook his head. “Never mind.”

Liion waited until everyone had finished their drinks. Then when the servers had taken the dishes, he spoke again.

“It is time to return to our tasks,” he announced. “Our guests may accompany you if they wish. We will meet again for dinner.”

Kane nodded to the others. “Stay with whomever you rode here with. “We will speak again when night falls.”

The crowd all separated and began to walk away. Tarok remained by Miranda as she hugged and kissed her husband goodbye.

“I will see you tonight,” she told them. Then she took Tarok’s arm and led him away. “Come,” she said. “The herds await us.”

X

She and Tarok rode out to the very spot on the beach where he had first met her. She whistled loudly and the sea lizards, about twenty of them, began to come out of the water. Riding her mount around them, she made them stand in a straight line. Then she led her mound down to the shoreline and walked along the coast. The lizards followed, pausing only briefly to stoop down and gobble up one of the wandering crabs.

“Do you tend to these animals every day?” Tarok asked, still riding behind her on the mount.

“Yes. That is my duty when I have no young children,” she answered. “I watch over the lizards by day and see that they are safely in their lagoon by night. When they are ready to be killed for the cooks, I do that too.” She looked over her shoulder at the following lizards.

“I won’t kill today,” she decided. “None are big enough, yet.”

“I didn’t see any of them at the feast,” Tarok observed. “Do you not eat them as often?”

“The hounds are our main food,” she explained. “Along with fruits and vegetables grown in our gardens. The lizards are usually eaten at breakfast, particularly by the children when their teeth first come in. it is softer and easier on their stomachs than hounds.”

Her face adopted a wistful expression when she spoke of children, prompting Tarok to remember Liion’s words at the lunch table. “You said all of the people back there were your family?”

“Yes,” she answered. Kalgar and Kor are the youngest ones I myself had, about three hundred years ago.” Her brow furrowed. “Or around that time. Sometimes I lose track of the centuries; one day is much like any other unless new children are born, or a wedding occurs.”

Tarok’s head snapped up. “What? Did you say centuries?”

“Is something the matter? You don’t look well.”

“Miranda…how old are you, may I ask?”

Her brow furrowed, not with offence at the forward question, but confusion at Tarok’s stunned face and voice. “Sixty or seventy centuries. Why?”

“But that can’t be! How is it you aren’t long dead? You only look around your mid thirties.”

“Why do you act so surprised? Animals die out, yes, but we do not. We are Harzhan’s offspring, and are both body and spirit. Is it not the same for you?”

“No. Xanogar only live about eight decades. Ten if we’re lucky,” Tarok answered. “We grow old, and die.”

They sat on the mount in silence as each processed the other’s information. Tarok thought on the extraordinary facts he had just heard from his alien companion. He didn’t fully understand why these people seemed deathless, but he somehow felt the truth of her words. It also explained why he had seen relatively few children and no old people at the banquet hall. He suspected that romance and marriage and childbirth here were far less frequent than on Xodos, but far purer and more meaningful. For here, they would not be tainted by loneliness and mortality.

Overhead, the sun was about two hours from the horizon and the temperature had cooled somewhat. But it was still very warm for Tarok. Almost too warm; the atmosphere must have kept heat sealed in like on the second moon, but in a more pleasant balance. Indeed, he felt right at home here, by the alien sea with his ageless companion. For a moment, he thought about how he would feel about staying right here and never returning to Xodos.

“You are not like the others, are you Tarok?” Miranda asked, breaking the silence after several minutes.

“How do you mean?” he asked.

“You have a different manner from the others,” she said. “Kane and the others speak strange, self centered ideas, and espouse adherence only to one’s own wishes. They don’t understand Harzhan. But somehow, I think you could.”

Tarok sighed. “Ah, Miranda, I hate to tell you this, but we are a ‘tainted’ people as you would put it. Only a few on Xodos believe in the original Creator. I do, but I don’t claim to be a perfect example.”

“But there is a goodness to you,” she insisted. “I would almost say that your Creator is Harzhan. He seems to have a similar character and powers.”

“Perhaps,” he conceded. “But I’m not sure. Just because we believe in one god hardly means we serve the same.”

“Maybe you should try praying to Harzhan. He could tell you the truth.”

Before he could reply, growling and splashing sounds emerged from the ocean. Miranda rounded up her lizards by riding around them again and lining them up. Then she rode further down the beach, leading her herd.

“Wild sea lizards!” she explained over her shoulder. “They are very territorial and attack domesticated ones whenever they can.”

He looked back, and saw several wild ones swimming towards them in the water. The domesticated lizards tried to run away, but they were much slower and plodded along clumsily. One at the rear of the herd tripped and fell to the ground. It tried to get up, but began to shriek in dismay, having discovered that it caught its foot in a crevice. The wild ones got out of the water and stalked towards the trapped creature.

Miranda, hearing her charge’s cry, swung her mount back around, halting the rest of the herd. She saw the situation, and grabbed a pouch behind the saddle. Pulling several rocks out, she threw one at the nearest attacking sea lizard. It howled, and shook, but still advanced on its fallen brother. More rocks followed, hardened darts from Miranda’s hand. Finally, they backed away, and returned to their underwater home.

“Beasts! They have become even worse than last time,” she remarked irritably. “It is as if they have been disturbed somehow. And it only makes my duties that much harder.”

She shook her head in disgust, and slid off the mount’s back. Tarok followed as she walked over to the still fallen domestic lizard. Reaching down, she gently freed it from where it had become trapped and inspected its leg for broken bones. Satisfied that the creature was unhurt, she picked up the throwing stones, replaced the pouch, and climbed back on the waiting mount.

They rode on longer. With the danger past, the lizards had taken to foraging again. They made a lot of noise, poking through the rocks and crunching crabs in their jaws when they found them. But Tarok wasn’t listening to them; instead he was thinking of Miranda’s last words, and wondered if he and his fellows were the disturbance on this unspoiled world.

It was nightfall before the Xanogar had a chance to talk with each other. They were in a guest dwelling now that had been prepared by Liion. He had suggested that it would be easier to remain here than return to their ship every night. Kane had ordered a watch when they went to sleep, but no one felt in danger.

They had all spent a relaxing day with the aliens, learning what they did, how they interacted, and how they thought. They had told Kane everything they had learned, including the curious fact that the aliens seemed devoid of corruption, diseases, and other faults that were all too common on Xodos. Kane was now deciding on what to do next.

“They seem to have no technology besides primitive blacksmithing,” he said. “So it couldn’t have been they who shut down our probes.”

“Nor do I think they would have, general,” Elnara spoke up. “They are good people. They have the same minds and feelings as we do, but they control them remarkably well, and do not seem prone to excessive or vengeful sentiments.”

Kane thought for a minute. “What do you make of their claim of advanced age?”

“I don’t question it,” Tarok said.

“Don’t you?” Tayzar asked, before the general could reply. “You don’t think such things can really exist, do you?”

“We didn’t know there even was another race until now,” Tarok argued. “Why not? I can’t explain why, but I believe they are telling us the truth.”

“Yes,” Elnara agreed. “Again, I don’t think they would ever try to lie.”

“No, not lie,” the general replied. “Perhaps it’s a simple matter of not having as large a concept of time. After all, this world is simple; one day is most likely the same as any other. Think of how much harder it would be without a busy routine.”

“Or maybe they are blessed with health and abilities beyond our own.” Tarok said.

“Perhaps,” Kane said. “But there is something going on here. Golden men or no, there is something hidden, and I mean to find it. If it can be used to benefit our civilization, it is our duty to get if for ourselves.”

The next morning, a hunting party left the village to capture a wild hound for lunch. Kane, wishing to see more of the countryside, went with them. The party set off on mounts, and then split into smaller groups and separated. Kane went with Liion, Kor and Kalgar.

“A cool day, from the feel of it,” Kalgar remarked as a light breeze blew through the trees.

“Not cool enough,” Kane replied. “On Xodos, this is still unbearably hot.”

“Tell us of our world,” Kor said, looking up at the sky. Sure enough, the ringed world could be seen, only the size of a large coin from where they were. Kane felt mild surprise; so far the people of Kayraan had shown very little interest in Xodos. Instead, they had focused on the Xanogar themselves.

“It is much colder there,” he answered. “Snowfall occurs all year around.”

“How do your cities manage?” Kor asked.

“All live in larger cities than yours. And each city, furthermore, is self sufficient. We don’t need to go out and hunt. Everything is prepared for us in the city itself.”

“It sounds very interesting,” Kor remarked.

“I wouldn’t mind not having to hunt as often,” Kalgar said. “Sometimes it is exhausting to find food for everyone.”

“I’m not sure his differences are better or worse,” Liion said. “They seem merely arbitrary.”

“It is necessary to impose more order than you are used to on my world,” Kane replied.

“But if you served Harzhan, that would be enough,” Liion replied. “I think you must be tainted, or close to it.”

A howl off in the distance was heard, cutting them off. “Hounds,” the three golden people remarked in unison. Liion turned to the others. “Kalgar, remain with the mounts. The rest of us can go.”

Kane followed the two hunters as they made their way to a pool of water. They moved quickly but quietly, and had drawn metal throwing knives along the way.

Kane tried to get a closer look, but snapped on a twig, prompting them to glare at him. Then they turned their attention back to the pool.

A hound looked around nervously, having heard Kane in the bushes. They all held very still and out of sight, but the brute still pawed at the ground nervously.

“It smells us, because you gave it warning,” Liion told Kane, with a slight admonishment. Kane frowned, not wanting to be scolded by someone he regarded as a primitive.

But Liion had already turned to Kor. “We must work quickly, once its guard drops.”

Eventually, the hound stopped pawing the ground, and went back to drinking, dipping its muzzles into the still water. Liion raised his knife and threw it, hitting the creature between the shoulder blades. It reared up and howled, trying to run off, but then Kor threw his knife, hitting the head.

“Now!” Liion said, and leaving Kane behind, they drew their swords and ran to the weakened hound. Jumping on its back, Kor slit its throat. The creature fell to the ground, and died after a few minutes.

After kneeling down and bowing their heads for a moment, they all stood up and carried the carcass on their shoulders.

“What were you doing back there?” Kane asked.

“Giving thanks to Harzhan,” Liion answered.

“I figured you were praying to Harzhan afterwards,” Kane replied. “But I meant while you were killing the hound. Wasn’t that cruel? And if so, how can you become cruel and remain untainted?”

“We regard the hound’s life and inflict no excessive or unnecessary pain,” Liion insisted. “We kill as quickly as possible, and only what we need for food.”

“But isn’t pain in general an evil?” Kane asked. For he disliked the golden aliens thoughts on taintedness and felt the need to prove that they were not as different from him as they would like to think. Their talk of Harzhan made him uneasy for reasons he couldn’t understand.

“No base feeling or concept is evil in itself,” Liion said. “Harzhan tells us that it is the misuse of feeling and action that is tainted. Even pain has its uses. What if you were to stick your hand in fire? The pain you feel makes you retreat before you get more hurt. It is unpleasant, but unpleasant does not equal tainted when there is a greater purpose.”

Kane marveled at the chieftain’s wisdom. He realized now that he had been greatly mistaken to believe these creatures were stupid. They were ignorant, but noble, and Kane thought them to be useful allies, if only he could diffuse Harzhan and get them to join him. If only he had an ally or group of allies, he could learn all of Kayraan’s hidden secrets.

“I see why defensive pain would have some advantage,” he conceded after a minute. “But what of disease? Or childbearing? What possible advantage do these have?”

“I don’t know ‘disease’. Childbearing, Miranda tells me, is uncomfortable, but not painful,” Liion said.

“I find that hard to believe,” Kane said. “On Xodos, the body fails and is prone to all kinds of discomfort.”

“Such things exist?” Kor asked, interested. “Tell me more of this.”

“No,” Liion said firmly. “We don’t need to know that, and I dislike the sound of it all. Let us get this hound to Kalgar. Then, we will go after another.”

Upon reaching their clearing, they dropped the hound by a fire that Kalgar had just made. Then the cook took his own knife and began cutting the meat up for food. The others went back into the woods to find another hound.

Kane walked behind them, looking at the younger Kor. He had wanted to learn more about Xodos, but the senior hunter wouldn’t have it. That left Kane wondering whether he could use that to his advantage. Perhaps, he could get some help through the alien’s curiosity. In return, he could found out whatever the planet might be hiding. And exploit it. Perhaps, he could even use what he found to become his own master when he returned home, no longer having to answer to the likes of Gorath and Zyndatha.

“My friends, if I may, I would like to hunt the next hound for you,” he said, making them turn around.

“How can you hunt, Kane?” Liion asked. “You have neither sword nor knife.”

“No, but I have this,” he answered, pulling his wrist laser out of his pocket, and putting it on his arm. “This is called a wrist laser, powerful technology from Xodos. I show it to you to prove my good intentions, and in hopes we may one day work together.”

Several hundred feet away, a lone hound came into view. It poked around the bushes, still not aware of the hunters’ presence. Kane stepped forward, and waved the golden men back.

“Now I show you one of my world’s treasures,” he whispered to the baffled hunters. Taking aim, he fired a laser blast, burning through the hound’s midsection, and killing it instantly.

“What happened?” Kor demanded, amazed. “It was like fire. Or lightening!”

“But you did it,” Liion agreed. “How could that be?”

“It is only a sample of what my world has,” Kane answered. “But let us keep it to ourselves for now. Later on we can…share our respective secrets.”

They went to the dead hound and were about to hoist it on their shoulders when Kane saw something off in the distance. It was a golden light, coming up from a nearby valley. But what amazed the general was the seeming unnaturalness of it. It was almost as if it didn’t belong.

“What is that?” Kane asked, pointing to the light.

Liion looked at it, and a look of dismay came to his face. “Oh no. We have come to the valley. We should leave now.”

“Wait. What is there?” Kane asked, taking a step forward.

“No, Kane,” Liion said, taking his arm. “Don’t go there! We could become tainted.”

“What are you talking about?” the Xanogar asked.

“Can you really not know?” Liion demanded. “How can you be so ignorant? Harzhan created the world, and all in it. Then he made us to ask as caretakers over it. But he wanted his children’s devotion to be true, so he created a test. Within that valley, he placed a staff of power. But he told us not to touch it, for to do that would be to bring misery. So far, it has remained here, and we have remained untainted. Are you satisfied now, Kane? May we leave, as I said we should?”

“Why did you never mention this before?” he asked.

“We do not like to talk about it,” Liion said, starting to walk away.

“Wait,” Kane called, stopping him. “Could I have a look at it?”

“Absolutely not,” Liion said. “Why would you want to see something so dangerous?”

“I did you a favor just now, did I not?” Kane asked. “Besides, you said nothing was bad in and of itself, didn’t you?”

“He has a point,” Kor spoke up. “Besides, Harzhan never forbade us from looking at it. What harm could come from satisfying our friends curiosity?”

“Liion sighed deeply, and looked warily at the valley. “This is not good, but very well. Let us be brief though.”

Kane nodded, and Liion led them into the valley. When they walked downhill into a tight cluster of trees, Kane noticed something strange. The birds weren’t singing in this valley, and there was a cool breeze, chilling him. It all seemed to create an atmosphere of foreboding.

In the center of the trees was a rod, six feet high, stuck in the ground, and apparently a type of Star Crystal. It was smooth, featureless, but glowed with an unnatural golden light. Fascinated, Kane reached out and touched it. As soon as his fingers contacted it, however, he felt a shock, and he was violently thrown backward into a tree.

“You fool!” Liion shouted. “You should not have done that!”

Kor helped the general to his feet. “No creature is able to touch it, save our people, it is said.”

Kane looked at it, entranced by its strange beauty and raw power. “I never saw anything so powerful,” he whispered. He began to pace around it. “This is more powerful than a thousand lasers! I see some of the mysteries of your planet now. Although I still can’t explain how we speak the same, I see why our equipment kept failing. This object must be putting out some kind of interference. Yes, what else could it be?”

Liion looked upward. “I hear Harzhan speaking in my mind,” he whispered tensely. “He says we are not tainted yet, but that we are to leave at once. And frankly, I never wanted to come here at all.”

“Such power,” Kane whispered, still looking at the staff.

“Please! Let us go, and speak to no one of this,” Liion pleaded.

“Yes, of course,” Kane said soothingly. “You have repaid my favor, and I am grateful. Now come, let us go and hunt some more. I am your friend, and I will help you.”

XII

The third day the Xanogar were with Liion and company, the patriarch had news for his visitors over breakfast.

“Last night, I heard Harzhan speak to me before I went to sleep,” he told general Kane. They were all seated together in the banquet hall once again. “He wishes to meet one of you on his island.”

“Why is that?” Kane asked, furrowing his brow. He and Liion had not spoken to each other much last night. The alien chief seemed upset, although whether at him or at the situation in the valley, Kane couldn’t be sure. Of course, being a self worshipper, trust came very hard for him even in the best of circumstances.

“Indeed,” Liion said. “He says you have many questions and he wished to provide answers. He was also very specific on which one of you he wanted to see.”

He turned to Tarok. “Your pilot is the one who will come.”

Tarok looked up in surprise. However, before he could say anything, he felt a voice speaking in his head. Not merely heard, but felt, and he couldn’t say if it were his own thoughts or not. It told him to agree, that he was the one who should go.

“General, with you permission, I would like to go and meet him,” Tarok answered.

Kane looked at him, considering. “And you would tell me everything you learn, pilot?”

“Yes, general.”

“Then you may go. And return as soon as you can.”

“Good. The rest of your men may stay with my people,” Liion said. He looked at Kor and Kalgar. “You, my sons, are in charge of the city until your mother and I return. Take Kane hunting but remember, stay away from where we were yesterday.”

He looked at Kane meaningfully. The latter nodded, but gave no elaboration to his fellow Xanogar. The golden patriarch was right; it would not do to tell the others about it. Not if there was a way to get it himself.

“I will help hunt in another part of the woods,” Kane told him aloud. “I wish to see more of your world before we consider returning to ours.”

“Thank you,” Liion said, relieved. He looked up and over the crowd. “Farewell, my children. I go now to Harzhan.”

Liion led Miranda and Tarok outside, where they mounted some fresh horses, and made for the beach. Tarok was puzzled where the chief was taking him until he saw the orb shaped object floating on the water. It was made of white crystal and glowed in the sunlight, looking as if it had been polished by the waves themselves. Furthermore, it was featureless on the outside except for the open hatchway.

Liion rode up into the ship and the other two followed suit. The door closed behind them. As they dismounted, Tarok felt a lurch as the ship moved away from the coast and out to sea. He looked around the interior and was surprised to see only a few food supplies in one corner, a pen for the animals in another, and some sleeping mats in the middle of the floor. The inside walls, ceiling and floor were the same crystal material, and the area, while opaque, glowed with a warm light. A few windows at the front below the water line gave them a view of the ocean gliding beneath them, alive with fish, jellies, and lizards.

There was, however, something he definitely didn't notice. "Where are the controls to this ship?" he asked Liion. "And where did it come from? I've never seen anything like it before."

"Harzhan himself made it and guides it where it needs to go," Liion answered. "Now, we go to Harzhan's palace in the northern sea."

"How far away is that?" Tarok asked.

"About a week from here," he answered. "You will forgive me, but Harzhan said that I am to answer no more questions until you are in his presence."

"I assume he will answer them himself," Tarok said, with some disappointment.

Miranda led the animals to the stable and secured it. Then she faced Tarok with a slight smile.

“Do not fear, Tarok. I too heard Harzhan in the night. He says you are one of us. You always have been.”

Tarok looked at them, and didn’t know how to answer.

A week passed, and Tarok one day found himself staring at a huge mountain chain in the middle of the ocean. It was several miles in area and reached up hundreds of feet above the level of water. So vast and ominous, it seemed almost impenetrable, save for the crack which became visible the nearer they approached.

Liion, who had been polite but reserved, turned to the Xanogar. “We have arrived, Tarok. Prepare to meet our lord.”

As he spoke, the ship moved through the narrow pass. On either side, the jagged walls loomed precariously, but Tarok knew he was in no danger.

When they were through, Tarok looked out in amazement. Surrounded by a wall of rock was a lush garden island. It contained a building much like the banquet hall back on the mainland. Only this one had a larger, more palatial central tower.

Among the gardens, Tarok also saw several golden lights flickering back and forth among them, moving like fireflies. He was just about to ask what they were when the ship came to a stop on the shore, and the door opened for them. The three occupants walked out, and the two golden people began to walk to the tower. Tarok followed, and as they walked, the lights flitted from the garden to them and back.

Tarok saw that they didn’t seem to be fireflies or any animal at all. They were just bursts of energy, giving off slight warmth, but not otherwise tangible. He felt no fear of them, only a

strange awe, that of something both new and old. For he felt a familiarity about them, as if they were or represented something he once knew.

Two of the lights flitted far more slowly, and hovered off to the side of Tarok, seeming to follow him as he walked to the palace. He felt a strange sensation, as if the lights were beckoning him, and he paused. Then, he slowly walked over to them, and reached out his hands to touch them.

Suddenly, he felt no longer alone. Where the lights were, there were now two people hugging him. Two people he knew all too well.

“Mother?” he asked, in disbelief. “Father?”

Indeed it was. He knew their presence. He felt their love for him, their happiness at seeing him again. His eyes welled up with sudden tears as he realized how he had missed them. He had had no other family and few friends, even among his fellow Creator worshippers. But his parents had always been there, always offering their support and unconditional love. He hugged them back, and felt such joyful surprise that he nearly forgot the errand that had brought him to this strange and wonderful place.

A hand came on his shoulder, and he turned around. Liion was there, with Miranda behind him.

“Tarok. We must not keep Harzhan waiting,” he said.

Tarok looked back, and saw that his parents were gone. The two lights were back, and were drifting away to mingle with the other lights in the garden.

“But…I saw them,” he said, both to himself and to his companions. “My mother and father. They’re dead, but they were here? How?”

“I saw nothing, but Harzhan knows,” Liion replied. “Come.”

“But,” he repeated. He broke off, and wiped his eye. Tears began to stream down his face as he realized for the first time how lonely he truly had been. That was why it had been so easy to leave Xodos in the first place. He had told himself that he was seeking adventure, but what he really wanted was fulfillment that only loved ones could provide.

Miranda hugged him then, as though sensing his feelings. “Don’t weep here, Tarok. This is a good place. Harzhan is everywhere, but especially here.”

She took his hand, and led him to the door. Liion walked ahead and they entered. A long, well lit hallway took them to another door, and they stopped in front of it. Liion and Miranda bowed, and Tarok instinctively followed suit.

The doors silently swung open of their own accord. “Arise Liion and Miranda,” a male voice called from outside. “Arise, Tarok.”

They walked into a room that was somewhat softer lit, but enough so that he could see the sole occupant seated on a golden throne. He looked similar to Liion, only a foot taller and more solid than any other alien he had so far encountered. He had brown hair, a full beard, and the wisest eyes Tarok had ever seen. He knew immediately that he was in the presence of someone far greater and more powerful than he could have possibly imagined. This man was dangerous too. But there was no trace of cruelty or pettiness in the man, and the danger was matched with justice and benevolence.

“Lord Harzhan, I have brought the Xanogar, as you requested,” Liion told the seated man.

“I have been expecting you for some time, Tarok. I knew you would come and here you are.”

“You…are Harzhan?” Tarok stammered nervously.

“I am,” Harzhan answered. “I made the world longer ago than you can imagine. I have dwelt with my people from the time I first created Liion and Miranda. I have seen worlds’ beginnings and endings, and yes I even know your own Xodos, for it too is my creation.”

“To be in your presence….I could almost believe it,” Tarok began. Liion gasped, but Harzhan waved the comment away. “Let it be, Liion. His world is not as this one.” He looked at Tarok intently. But you have heard my speaking o thou here. You answered my call to come here- and oppose General Kane. You have never seen me before, yet you know who I am.”

Tarok was very much beginning to suspect, but still had one objection.

“But just because we each believe in one god hardly means they are the same.”

“Very true. But in this case, it is so,” Harzhan answered. “I am he whom you call the Creator, as your mother taught you, and as she also taught your father.”

“My parents,” Tarok echoed. He found himself looking at the wall, as if he could see the shining lights outside. Now he realized what they were; the souls of the Xanogar who had been Creator worshippers in life. This place, this faraway moon, was none other than the Creator’s realm. Now, he found himself disconcerted that he was in the presence of the Creator after all. He looked back nervously. Are you reading my mind now? He wondered.

“More than read, I know it,” Harzhan confirmed. “But you require still more proof? Behold!”

Harzhan made no gesture, but suddenly a table and chair materialized before him. There were several pieces of toast, buttered with a spread that he remembered from home. Several fish form the oceans were there as well, cooked and waiting to be eaten. The whole room was filled with the food’s mouth watering aroma.

Tarok knew that he had just witnessed something incredible. No simple trick, no illusion, could account for this. He dropped to his knees, the last amount of doubt leaving him.

“You are the Creator,” Tarok said. “You have returned to the world at last. Forgive my unbelief.”

“I never left; your world did,” Harzhan answered. “But I forgive you. Have something to eat. I must tell you something very important.”

Kane had spent the past week with the hunters and had told them much of Xodos, particularly to the wide eyed Kor, who couldn’t get enough. Kane felt satisfied that he had found the ally he sought, one who could be eventually be persuaded to get that staff for him. He hadn’t been able to stop thinking about it since he learned of its existence.

He was riding a mount to his ship, followed by Kor and Kalgar, marveling at how easy the animals were to ride. When they reached the ship, still undisturbed on the beach, he dismounted. Kane pressed a button and opened the hatch, leading the mystified aliens in. He took them inside, and signaled them to wait at the door of the cockpit.

“I’m going to introduce you to my King Gorath,” he told them. “He isn’t here; you will only see an image of him. But they will be able to see and hear you and you will be able to talk with them. Wait here and I will announce you.”

He entered the cockpit, shut the door behind him, and walked over to a monitor. Activating it, he dropped to his knees, waiting for the transmission to start. An image of King Gorath appeared, seated on his throne.

“Your majesty,” he greeted. “I have much to share with you. Things that will change our world forever.”

“General Kane, where have you been?” Gorath asked. “It’s been over a week since I heard from you.”

“Your majesty, I have discovered that there is another race of people on the farthest moon,” Kane told him. “We never knew until now because of the failing equipment. But I have discovered the reason for that, too.”

Out in the hall, the two brothers walked close to the door to hear what was being said. They had no suspicions, but were merely curious. Nothing, however, could have prepared them for what they heard.

“Extraordinary,” the king said in wonder. “Are they hostile? Do they possess any other weapons?”

“No, no; they are quite primitive,” Kane assured them. “But they showed me a powerful crystal in the forests here, one that most likely interferes with smaller electronics. It can’t stop ships, apparently, but could still be very useful in our hands.”

“If you believe it could be used safely, bring it back here,” Gorath said.

“Unfortunately, only they can touch it. That’s why I had to get a few allies here before I could speak with you. They are waiting in the hall now, and I wished to introduce them to you. I have swayed a few of them by showing them some of our technology.”

Kane chuckled. “They are so backward; they couldn’t help being impressed by me. It’s almost as flattering as it is amusing.”

“Then bring them to me,” the king ordered.

“Yes, your majesty,” he said. “They call themselves the children of Harzhan, and for reasons I can’t explain, they can speak Xanogar.”

Outside the door, Kor and Kalgar looked at each other with dismay. They had heard everything Kane had said from where they were.

“What does he mean?” Kalgar asked. “Why did he never say any of this before?”

“He had no regard for us at all,” Kor said, frowning. “He just wants the staff. Father is right; he is tainted.”

Kor walked away from the door, his frown darkening. His face assumed a terrible expression that Kalgar had never seen before, and it frightened him.

“He knew what he was telling us wasn’t true,” Kor muttered. “He willfully spoke wrongly in order to get something he desired.”

“What should we do?” Kalgar asked, looking back at the door uneasily.

“We won’t run. We must find a way to get rid of him,” Kor said.

They heard a shuffling noise from behind the door and knew he was coming back. They went back to where they were told to wait.

“Don’t let him know that we heard,” Kor whispered quickly, as the door opened. Kane came out and waved them forward. “Sorry,” he said pleasantly. “My king will see you now.”

“Think nothing of it,” Kor answered. “You have an amazing transport here, Kane,”

They walked in, and saw the image of the Xanogar. Thinking quickly, Kor bowed his head respectfully. “I am Kor,” he said, introducing himself. “This is my brother, Kalgar.”

“I am King Gorath,” the white robed Xanogar replied. “It is a pleasure to meet you people of the distant moon.”

“Thank you,” Kor answered. “Kane has told us much of your world. Yet he tells us there is still more yet to share, once our worlds begin working together.”

“Yes, indeed,” Gorath said. “But perhaps a token of goodwill is in order first. If I may, you three…could give your most powerful secret: the staff Kane tells us about. In return, we could give you spaceflight, and show you our world firsthand. There are greater things here than you can imagine.”

“But…Harzhan said it must not be touched,” Kalgar protested. “It brings misery.”

“But you wouldn’t be keeping it. You would be giving it to us,” Kane insisted. “Besides, if we give you ways to ease your lives in return…” He held up his wrist laser. “…how could there be misery in that? Surely goodness is Harzhan’s will.”

Kor knew that the Xanogar were lying. He had just learned the meaning of the word, and had now seen the concept in action. They only cared for themselves, and would most likely leave them after they had what they wanted. He felt anger, anger that his curiosity could be first fed, and then snubbed by these lying aliens.

I will get it for you, he thought bitterly. But I use it to stop you, not aid you.

He looked at the king and lord, trying to appear humble and innocent, like they expected. “I suppose that is so,” he said. “Perhaps we misunderstood Harzhan, perhaps we are to merely use the staff properly, not refrain from using it. I will get if for our people’s good.”

“Excellent. I will contact you tomorrow,” Gorath said. “In the meantime, I must send word of these people to the other noblemen on Xodos. They should know.”

Kane bowed respectfully. “Good bye, your majesty. I will keep you informed.”

He stood back up and shut off the communication. Then, he led the brothers out of the ship. If they had been Xanogar, he would have been highly suspicious at the ease with which he had convinced them. But after a week with these people, he was convinced he could trust them. Indeed, once he had the staff, he was convinced that he could rule them and this moon. He could be a king here himself. Let Gorath and Zyndatha remain on Xodos, trying to hold things together. He could slowly but surely build his own kingdom here, and then return as an equal not as a servant.

Smiling, he mounted his horse, and rode off towards the valley of the staff. Kor and Kalgar got on their own mounts, and rode behind him.

Suddenly, the brothers looked skyward, as if something grabbed their attention. They lagged behind Kane, although the general didn’t notice. Then they looked at each other, as if thinking the same thing. It was Kor who broke the silence.

“Harzhan spoke to us,” he said.

“Yes,” Kalgar agreed. “He said we were in danger of breaking his command. That we are right not to trust Kane, but this isn’t the way to fight him. We should let him handle the aliens.”

“I don’t think Harzhan knows their powers,” Kor replied grimly. “He hasn’t seen Kane’s lightening, or his masters speaking to us from faraway Xodos. We have. We must help our people alone this time.”

He rode on, and Kalgar shook his head sadly, but followed. They heard the voice of Harzhan no more.

Tarok, Liion and Miranda ate at the table and chairs provided for them. The food was more delicious than anything he had ever tasted. As he ate, Tarok noticed that the quantity of food never diminished. At first, it bothered his senses, but he shrugged it off and kept eating. After all, he was in the presence of the Creator.

“I made your would and peopled it long before I made Liion and Miranda,” Harzhan was saying. “I wished for a race of followers. But, they had to be genuine followers, for if they had no free will, then their devotion would be a false and hollow thing.”

“Why did you wish for followers at all, Creator?” Tarok asked, trying to sound respectful as he did so.

“To create and to love my creation is my nature,” Harzhan said. “But, as I said, their decision had to be real. I gave your people the choice to serve me or not. To come into my presence after death or to flee from it. Your people chose not to serve me, save for a few, and they shall be rewarded.”

He gestured outward. “Those in the garden await the end of the age, when they will be reborn in a new and glorious form.”

“Then you came here, and created us, master?” Liion asked.

“I did. I taught you my ways and speech, like the Xanogar. And like the Xanogar, you had your test, in the form of the staff I left in the valley. So far, you have passed the test. But those days are at an end.”

“Why master,” Liion asked, his face falling. “Is it because of these people?” He pointed to Tarok, who shuffled uneasily in his seat.

“No,” Harzhan said. “The fault is with your children. I have warned the two who go to the staff, but they will not heed.” He looked at Tarok. “Still, there is one among you who has actively, knowingly, led them astray. You know of whom I speak.”

“General Kane,” Tarok replied. “Master, what should we do?” It all sounded so frightening for them. Would these noble people really fall, as his own world had? Was there nothing he could do?

“For the moment, nothing,” Harzhan answered. “Free will shall remain. Some will choose to go with them, but most will remain with me.”

“But surely, you could stop it,” Tarok insisted.

At this, Harzhan frowned. He stood up, and folded his arms. Tarok looked up warily as he towered over him.

“Do you think yourself wiser than I?” he asked quietly.

“No, Creator, but…”

“Would you wish me to take your will from you? Would you not fight with every fiber of your being to hold onto it? If so, then don’t have me take it from others.”

“My lord, I’m sorry,” Tarok apologized. “But I’ve grown to love these people. Yes, I’ve only known them for a short while, but I don’t want to see them hurt.”

“Neither do I, but they make their own decisions,” Harzhan answered firmly. “”But fear not. I’ve known from the beginning this would happen, and have made a plan. One that will give the chance for good its greatest power. One that will indeed make many come to me again. And those faithful will be with me when I restore all.”

“Restore all?” Tarok echoed. “Then, if you knew the future, you also knew when you’d first act. You were the one who shut down the space probes, weren’t you Creator? You made this planet a tantalizing mystery, so that we’d want to come here. So that we’d be a part of your plan.”

“Yes. But you must first see the reason for my plan, before you will completely understand it,” Harzhan said.

Suddenly, Tarok found himself in the room no more. The walls, food and other guests seemed to melt away, and he was enveloped in a sea of blackness. All was silent, and he couldn’t tell where he was. He could shut his eyes, but it would make no difference.

Then light shone upon him, and brought tears to his eye as he frantically shielded it. But after a few moments, he slowly opened his eyes, and was confronted by the heavens themselves. Stars and galaxies swirled around him, arrayed in the shape of the night sky. He saw all the patterns; the constellations formed the letters of the Xanogar alphabet. It was from the star patterns in their sky that the ancients had developed writing.

Below him was Xodos and all the life it contained, despite its freezing temperature. And as he saw his world, he felt a sense of pure awe and wonder. He thought briefly how irrational it was for other people to assume that all these marvels came from nothing but random undirected fate. When he thought of the complex interplay of matter and energy, when he thought of the intricate detail of a single living cell, let alone the totality of life, he found the idea of randomness infinitely more farfetched than the Creator, even if he hadn’t just met him in person.

As he gazed at Xodos from high above, he noticed something strange. He could see every place on Xodos: the main city of Synestra, the colony cities, the tundra in between cities where food was grown, the unlivable wastelands at the poles, everything. He saw Xanogar being born,

growing to adulthood, marrying, living their lives, and dying over and over again. It was as if past and future alike were all rolled into one moment. And not only with the people. The glaciers migrated back and forth, the stars overhead changed their positions, and even the sun and moons flew across the sky so quickly, it was as if there were actually a whole chain of each. All was in the moment, and Tarok cried out in fear and pain at the crushing noise that pervaded it all.

Suddenly, a hand came over his eye, shutting the overwhelming sights and sensations out. “No, Tarok,” he heard Harzhan say. “Your mind cannot take it all in at once. Don’t look, or you will go mad.”

“Creator, what’s happening? Where are we?” Tarok asked, still badly shaken.

“Beyond,” Harzhan answered. “Haven’t you ever wondered how it is I can be everywhere and hear everything? Your people exist within limited space and time. I do not. I am the Creator, that which always was, from which everything else came. I made that which you saw, and then stepped back to see it in its entirety.”

“How far away are we?” he asked, confused at the very notion when he had been taught that the Creator was intimate and personal.

“Infinitely. But never so far that I cannot intervene,” came the answer. “I can move both in and out to hear and address the prayers and yearnings of all. To enter the lives of any who wish it. I am in all places, but only am in the things that desire me.”

“Do our prayers matter then, if you can see all and make your plans and moves accordingly?”

“Yes. Did I not say I hear all prayers? They are one of the factors I consider. I answer them when I see it is good to do so. When I do not, it is because I see the total pattern of one’s life and of that life’s surroundings. I can see the when the ultimate good is to grant it or not.”

Tarok thought about all of this for a moment. “Why am I here, Creator?” he asked.

“To see the beginning of your world,” Harzhan replied, removing his hand. “Behold!”

He was on Xodos now, staring at a city he had never seen. It looked almost like Synestra, only larger and cleaner. He noticed that the Xanogar there didn’t fly in air shuttles, either. Instead, they flew through the air. At first, Tarok thought it was of their own accord, but upon closer look, he saw that they had a faint glow, which was strongest around the Star Crystals they all carried. The buildings of the city surrounded a tower, much as the palace of Synestra formed the nucleus of that city.

“This is your world and people as they once were,” Harzhan explained from behind them. “Come, let me show you your patriarch.”

He picked up Tarok, and suddenly they were flying through the air, apparently unseen by the others. As they approached the tower, Tarok saw that the top had a sort of open sun room, its roof held up by four columns. They flew inside, and he saw a large and stately Xanogar standing around a glowing staff. A noise was heard over him, and he bowed down, not to the staff, but to the being that was descending down the skylight. It was unlike anything Tarok had ever seen, like a glowing Xanogar with six wings, multiple eyes, and three faces.

“Lord Harzhan! Make of all things! The one from which everything came. The one who always is. You are the Creator, we the created. Give us power, so that we might shape your world.”

“Stand forth and receive,” the Harzhan of ages past said.

Tarok looked at the present Harzhan with bewilderment. “That is you, master? But why do you appear in that strange form?”

“You see my three aspects,” came the reply. “One the Creator, one the ruler, and one the instructor, for that is the part of me which urges you to do what is right.”

Flying overhead, the past Harzhan shot beams of light into the staff. The staff, in turn, shot a beam of light into the patriarch’s Star Crystal. He bowed again, and flew out of the tower to the streets below. Each of the passersby, in turn, received an empowerment.

Then, Tarok’s field of vision expanded again, not to see everything, but to see the course of events over the next several years. He saw the Xanogar travelling from their city all over Xodos. They used heat from their crystals to create roads and shape the glaciers into beautiful geometric patterns. He saw them use their powerful shields to fly not only in the air, but through space itself, unhindered. They travelled to the moons, and used the heat from their bands to cause certain plants to grow and others to burn up. In this way, they created entire gardens that stretched over all the moons.

But as the years went on, Tarok noticed a very gradual, but very real change in the patriarch’s behavior. Slowly, he lost his enthusiasm for shaping and his gratitude to Harzhan for creation. He grew tired of working in his world, following his instructions. He began to have wants of his own.

All this he tried to hide from Harzhan. Nevertheless, one fateful day, the patriarch went alone to the tower. He gazed on the staff, which Harzhan had told him never to touch. This was the First Law, and to break it, Harzhan said, would bring death and misery. But would it? For that matter, did Harzhan really create him, he thought. After all, while Harzhan was there when he first became aware of himself, he only had Harzhan’s word that he wasn’t another creation, but the Creator above and beyond the universe itself.

Why not him? Why couldn't he do things for himself? That would be the way to test whether Harzhan was Creator or not.

He reached out, and tried to grab the staff. But when he did, he recoiled instantly, and was thrown back. He stood up, and frowned.

So, he thought, I can't touch it. Maybe I can move it another way. He looked down at a Star Crystal in his hand. For a moment, he wondered if the heat from it would damage the staff. Of course, once again, wouldn't that prove Harzhan's claim to deity?

Slowly, he pointed his crystal at the staff, and shot it, hoping to move it. But instead, it began to glow brighter, and shake violently. The floor trembled beneath him and, crying out in shock, he jumped out of the way. The pillars began to crack, and he flew out of the tower to the streets below.

The others nearby couldn't have possibly overlooked the commotion. They watched in terror as rays of light surged from the tower, hitting nearby buildings, and sending debris falling down on some of the unlucky bystanders. All began to scream and run off, for some of the Xanogar were killed, and this was the first time this had ever happened.

"Run! All of you!" the patriarch shouted to the others. "Something terribly wrong has happened."

They tried to fly, but couldn't, as their crystals had lost their glow, and were no longer functioning. Panicked, they began to run, and the streets were choked with disarray. Behind them, more energy blasts emanated from the tower, and the glow increased in size. The lights began to collapse and swirl around each other, forming a great storm. By the time they were approaching the edge of the city, the storm shook the tower to its foundations. Finally, it began to

topple, bringing down several other buildings in the process. When they all made it out, they recoiled in terror, for there was Harzhan, his eyes blazing with mixed anger and dismay.

“What have you done?” he demanded, although they knew the question was rhetorical. “You have tampered with powers you don’t understand, powers that you should have been content to leave to me. I imparted a portion of my power to the staff, and gave it to you so that you may share in running my creation. But now, you have disobeyed.”

Behind them, the storm flared up even more. They looked back in time to see bright flashes of light pulsing from the storm. The heat and light was such that they all screamed, and covered their faces.

“Harzhan’s wrath is upon us!” some shouted. Thousands of them ran away, fleeing into the snowy valleys and mountains. Harzhan watched as they abandoned their place with him. The patriarch and some of the others, however, stood their ground.

“This is your doing!” the patriarch shouted. “You made the staff an inviting mystery. You made me doubt who and what you were.”

“I told you everything you needed to know,” Harzhan countered. “It was you who called me a liar.”

Behind them, the city continued to crumble. More buildings fell under the crushing weight of the still expanding storm which now filled several city blocks.

“Did you really think that I was trying to harm you with the First Law?” Harzhan demanded. “I had hoped to protect you from this without taking your free will. You don’t understand; true power and authority is to serve, not be served. As it is, you will not be unpunished. The city will be taken, and you will lose your immortality.”

“We will never submit to you!” the patriarch answered. “Not again. We will be free, not servants.”

The storm rose, and consumed the city. Then it continued to expand, and the patriarch was caught up in the wind, along with the others who had sided with him. They flew, kicking and screaming, into the winds and vanished. But Harzhan raised his arms, and the storm stopped a few feet short of them. Then, it was moving away, up into the sky and out into space. Only the valley remained with the staff embedded in the snow. Harzhan took this, and flew into the sky.

His view expanded again, and Tarok saw the storm leave the atmosphere of Xodos. Then, it settled on the second moon, and seemed to be trapped there. Winds howled and whipped around the forests, withering and corrupting the vegetation. The waters all turned black and fetid. Indeed, the whole place seemed to be a wellspring of corruption, and Tarok felt Harzhan’s presence leave the place.

With the absence of Harzhan’s presence, also came the absence of any goodness. There would be no rest or peace here, as Harzhan was the source of both. To think clearly was gone, as thought and mind were Harzhan’s gifts. Health left the life here, as health, even the health of those who didn’t believe in him were supplied by Harzhan.

For the first time, Tarok appreciated how much Harzhan had blessed and given them throughout their lives, in spite of the fallen nature of the world. For even those who cursed and denied him still benefited from his gifts. Without any gift from Harzhan, only physical and mental pain remained. Only confusion, fear and anger.

So that was why the second moon had made him so uneasy. He had had the briefest of glimpses of a life without any Creator influence.

Tarok saw the view darken before his eyes. He was alone in the dark now, but still heard Harzhan's voice.

"It was too late for them. The others fled into the snow. In time, Synestra became their new leader, and I sent her visions of what needed to be done and said. From that came the Creator worshippers. The patriarch's world had ended, and the fallen world began. It will be a time of trials, where all must make the great choice to serve me or not. Then, the redeemed world shall rise, and it will be even greater than the old. One day, I will return."

Tarok found himself back in the palace on Kayraan. Liion and Miranda were still eating, apparently not realizing that they had ever left. It was as if the whole vision, or journey, or whatever it had been had taken but a moment. Harzhan was back as well, in his golden form and eyeing him intently.

"I…I never knew these things," Tarok said at last.

"You have learned much this day, Tarok," Harzhan answered. "But you must hear one thing more."

"My lord?" he asked.

"You will play a major role in the events to come. It is for that reason you were brought to Kayraan in the first place."

XIII

Kane and the aliens rode up to the valley deep in the forest. The unnatural golden glow still shone down on them as they dismounted. Kor looked over his shoulder at his brother.

"Stay here with the mounts," he told him. "Kane and I will get the staff."

The two men, Xanogar and child of Harzhan, walked down into the silent valley, with its cluster of trees and foreboding atmosphere. In the middle, the staff beckoned, waiting for one to take it from its resting place.

Kane waved Kor on, and after a brief hesitation, he reached out for the staff. He did so slowly at first, fearing a shock. But none came, so he closed his right hand around the staff. He felt a slight warm feeling s the crystal contacted his skin, but still, nothing happened. Finally, he pulled it out of the ground and looked at it with wonder and fear.

“You see?” Kane said, covering his own relief with smugness. “Nothing terrible happened. The ground didn’t swallow you up; no thunderbolt was hurled at you from on high. It is ours, now.”

“Yes,” Kor said, his fear subsiding. “It is. Now, if I can just use it. Maybe if I concentrate…” he trailed off and pointed one end at a nearby tree. He thought hard to himself, silently wishing the staff would shoot a beam of light at the tree and split it in half, the way Kane’s laser could.

Then to his surprise, that very thing happened. A ray of light sprang forth from the staff’s end and cut the tree long ways down the middle. The two halves crashed to the ground, and Kor laughed with pleasure. Kane chuckled himself and turned to leave.

“You seem to wield it with relative ease,” he observed. “Very good. We have what we came for. Now, come; let us begin to find out how exactly we can use it.”

“I believe I already know that,” Kor said behind him. Kane turned, and saw that the alien was pointing the staff right at him.

“What are you doing?” he demanded, not in the mood for games.

“I heard you talking to your king, Kane,” Kor said, quietly. “You spoke wrong words to us.”

Kane's face fell when he heard those words, and realized too late that he had made a mistake. He had underestimated these creatures and the ease with which they had been taught to deceive. He slipped his hands behind his back as casually as possible, and reached for his wrist laser. He had the feeling that he would need it soon.

"My friend, I believe you misunderstand me," the general said soothingly. "Just let me explain."

"You are no friend," Kor answered, shaking his head. "You want to use the staff and use me. But instead, I will rid Kayraan of all who try to rule over us." He hesitated a moment, as if considering something. Then he nodded grimly, making a decision.

"Yes. I will even chase away Harzhan should he try to stop me. But first things first. Give me that strange weapon you used to hunt."

"No!" Kane shouted. Finally reaching his laser, he pulled it out and fired several shots at Kor, but the alien held up his staff and deflected them without any difficulty. Then he fired his own blast at Kane, hitting the wrist laser, and burning his arm in the process.

Kane screamed as pain shot through his body, the first maliciously inflicted pain Kayraan had ever known. He heard Kor call his brother, and soon saw Kalgar standing over him, terrified.

"This staff shall indeed create a new world, but it shall be I ruling it, not some alien deceiver," he told him.

A whimper from behind Kor made him spin around, surprised. He saw two wild hounds nearby, whining and moaning, as if the brutes knew of the evil that had befallen their world. Kor pointed the staff at them. "Silence," he snapped.

Surprisingly, they obeyed him. Kor smiled with pleasant surprise. “So, I can control even the beasts with this? That’s good. I can use them to eliminate your people before they cause any more harm.”

He looked at Kane, and his look became one of pure hatred. “I can use them to eliminate you.”

He pointed his staff at the hounds. “Attack the Xanogar. Destroy him and all the people who oppose us.”

The hounds began whimpering at first, as if resisting. Then, their bodies went rigid; they let out a howl, and began stalking towards the general. As they advanced, their demeanors changed. Instead of acting timid and gentle, they began to growl savagely and drool at the prospect of killing. Kane recognized the danger he was in and began to run away. But the monsters (for that was what they now were), chased after him.

Behind him, Kor raised his staff and began shouting. “Come forth! Destroy the enemy!”

More roars sounded from the forest, and Kane stopped as other hounds appeared in front of him, growling and snapping. He turned around to see the first two closing in. knowing he would never escape, he closed his eye and shook with fear, all his thoughts of ruler ship and godhood gone. He had only a half second to dread before they leapt forward and sank their teeth into him.

From his table, Tarok saw Harzhan look up, a troubled expression on his face. “It has begun,” he said grimly. “Kayraan has fallen.”

He turned to his children. “Liion, you and the others must leave immediately. Your son, Kor, will come here very soon.”

“He listened to General Kane,” Liion said, looking down sadly. Miranda put his arm around him. “I was a fool. I knew Kane was tainted, but I thought…I thought if he were shown a better way, he would learn. I never imagined this.”

“No, because you didn’t know falsehood,” Harzhan said gently. “For that, you deserve praise, not condemnation.”

“Master, will the taintedness spread so quickly?” Miranda asked.

“It will,” Harzhan answered grimly. “It is so easy to follow one’s own wishes over mine. Your general Kane has learned that. Soon the others will, too.”

The day had started out simply enough in the city. People went about their business, and the Xanogar followed and observed. Today, they were at the far end of the city looking out over a field. The golden aliens were growing several crops that supplemented the diet of meat that the hunters brought. They all went about their business, not aware of the change that had taken place. But Tayzar and Elnara heard shouting from the village’s edge, prompting him to look up from where they sat. What they saw made them jump to their feet.

There were Kor and Kalgar, returning on their mounts from the hunting trip. But instead of hounds, they brought something else. There in Kor’s hand was the staff of power. General Kane was nowhere to be seen.

“Kor! What have you done?” One of the aliens tending the crops sputtered. “You have broken our greatest command.”

“It was necessary,” Kor returned. “Bring the aliens. We need to be rid of them.”

The people of Xodos, alerted by the commotion, stepped forward from the rows of crops. Tayzar and Elnara were in front of them. Several of the golden children of Harzhan crowded the field as well, trying to steal a glimpse of the forbidden staff, and what would come of it.

Kor pointed with his free hand at the visitors. “Yes. I have taken the staff of power. They came here to get it for themselves. Kane was in the process of taking it, but I killed him.”

“I don’t even know what that thing is,” Tayzar protested. “Surely we don’t share blame for our leader’s actions.”

“You,” Kor began. He paused and mouthed a word to himself, as if learning to speak it for the first time. “You lie! And I won’t let you have this.”

He looked around his fellows, who starred with mingled terror and dismay. “Let us all unite! I will throw out the invaders! Who’s with me?”

“I am, Kor,” a voice shouted.

“And so am I,” a second voice called out.

“And so am I,” a third said.

The Xanogar began looking around, quickly becoming fearful. They hadn’t seen the children of Harzhan like this before. Tayzar threw up his hands in a placating gesture. “Listen to me,” he pleaded. “Surely we can…”

Kor snarled and shot a bolt from his staff at him. Elnara cried out, and pushed her mate to the ground. The bold flew overhead, and struck the ground only a foot from the two. Tayzar didn’t respond, but looked down at her, surprised that she could put his safety over her own.

“Join me or die!” Kor shouted.

“No, no,” Kalgar said, jumping down, and standing in front of Tayzar and Elnara. “Kor, this is wrong; I don’t want to kill anyone else!”

Kor shot his brother with the staff then. Not lethally, but enough to burn his brother, and send him crumpling to the ground.

For a moment no one moved. For the first time, golden one had turned against golden one. For the first time, they had risen against one another. But before any could think of Harzhan, rage overcame several of them. They drew their swords, and some ran to Kor, while others ran to the Xanogar. Three Xanogar were cut down while Kor shot the ones who tried to attack him.

“Go!” Kalgar cried out to Tayzar and Elnara, from where he lay, writhing in pain. “Get back to your ship! You will die if you don’t!”

As the children of Harzhan began to fight against both each other and the Xanogar, Tayzar, Elnara, and Mordrak managed to run off to the stables. Kor, sensing that his prey was escaping, raised his staff.

“Hounds, come forth!” he shouted.

From out of the woods, a pack of wild hounds, driven to madness by the staff, appeared. The Xanogar looked on them with dismay as aliens scrambled out of the way. The monsters mauled several of the remaining visitors from Xodos.

Elnara and Mordrak reached the stables. Mordrak jumped onto a mount and rode away without looking back. Tayzar ran as fast as he could on his deformed leg, but tripped and fell to the ground. Elnara turned to come back for him as the monsters got closer and closer.

“Elnara!” Tayzar shouted. “Get away. Save yourself.”

“You’re coming with me,” she shot back, helping him to his feet. “After all we’ve been through, I won’t abandon you now.”

“It is not to your advantage,” he protested. “I’m crippled; I can’t fight for you. Have you been listening to that Creator worshipping pilot?”

She paused for a moment, and their eyes met briefly. Somehow, over the days they had been here, Elnara had felt a sense of injustice. That their people had lost their way, and had forgotten how to live. She had seen alien men and women who truly loved each other, not just lusted. She had seen beings committed to each other and their children. She had never seen fathers before coming to Kayraan. She felt that the very ideals that supposedly gave them freedom had instead made them slaves to their own desires and appetites.

“Perhaps I have been,” she answered quietly. Tayzar said no more, and they scrambled up to a mount and galloped away.

Behind them, she heard Kor shouting at his fellows. “There are three left. After them!”

The terrified Xanogar kept riding away. Several minutes later, they were riding up to the spaceship they had left on the beach. It was unlocked, because at the time they left, there had been no danger. Now, though, the seemingly benevolent aliens had turned on them and they were running for their lives. Mordrak was standing in the door; he at least had waited a moment to see if anyone else had survived.

The other two ran in. “There was no one else,” Tayzar told the other general. “Lock it!”

Mordrak did, and the two mechanics looked at each other.

“We have to get out of here,” Elnara said hurriedly.

“How can we?” Tayzar protested. “The pilot is off at sea. And you and I can only repair the ship, not fly it.”

“We have to try,” she insisted. “Otherwise we…”

She was interrupted by a loud clang on the door. The aliens had come up on their own mounts, and were banging their swords onto the door.

“Give us the ship,” they heard Kor’s voice say from outside. “I would speak with your king.”

“Not on your life,” Mordrak shouted back.

Outside, Kor looked at the children of Harzhan who had followed him. “You stay here and guard that ship. I must be off to Harzhan’s island, to make sure he is on our side in all this.”

“But why not use the staff to break into the ship?” one asked.

“No; I would destroy it. I have a better idea,” Kor said.

He walked over to the water, held onto the staff with both hands, and concentrated. The ship began to sink beneath the sand, as if it was caught in quicksand. The three inside cried out, and Mordrak ran to the cockpit. He jumped into the pilot’s chair, and turned on the engines. Pilot or no, he was at least going to try and take off to get away from this.

The Star Crystals activated and the engines ignited. A few golden ones standing too close got burned, and screamed in pain. Elnara felt sick to her stomach, but admitted that she didn’t know what else to do. Mordrak tried to pilot away, but Kor frowned and increased the staff’s power to keep pushing the ship into the sand.

Behind them, Tayzar saw and smelled smoke as the engines dipped into the sand, and began to fill up. He quickly ran up to the cockpit and hit an override button on the pilot's control panel. The engines shut off, and Mordrak looked at him with surprised anger.

"Don't! We can't get away, and if we try, we will wreck the engines!" Tayzar explained. "Then we will never get to leave."

"It might be a moot point," Mordrak answered as the ship was pushed into the sand even more quickly now. Kor, however, didn't bury the ship, but kept the front nose above the surface so that the three survivors could see the aliens and the ocean.

Kor concentrated again, and began to fly overhead, to the amazement of the others. "The staff has done everything I asked so far," he said, over his shoulder. "Time to deal with Harzhan. Stay here until I return."

Harzhan led Tarok, Liion and Miranda out of the palace, and down to the dock. The lights around them flitted about in a panicked and nervous manner, as though sensing something amiss. They reached the dock, and felt a cold wind. Looking up, they saw a dark shape approaching through the crack in the walls. Kor had arrived, much faster than he would have by boat, and was flying towards them.

"Go, my children," Harzhan ordered. "Into the boat. It will carry you to the mainland, and then work no more. I will deal with Kor."

"What will you do?" Liion asked. His eyes misted. "My son, why were you such a fool?"

"You must go," Harzhan repeated.

"But master…"

“You will see me again, I promise,” Harzhan said. “Leave!”

The three ran into the ship as the traitor landed on the deck opposite Harzhan. He nodded at the Creator, but didn’t bow or show any further reverence.

“Lord Harzhan, greetings,” he said. “I killed General Kane, who was trying to steal this staff from us. The others are either dead or hiding in their ship. I ask now for your blessing to kill the pilot and finish off the others.”

Harzhan was furious. “You dare disobey your Creator?” he demanded. “You failed the test I gave you. You have brought evil to your people. You dare think you are doing good?”

“I thought the test was to fight against tainted ones,” Kor protested, covering his dismay with argument.

“Your test was obedience,” Harzhan responded. “Give me the staff. Turn back now.”

But Kor only looked at him with suspicion. He had quickly forgotten how to trust once he had obtained the staff. It seemed everyone coveted it, and he wasn’t about to give it up.

“Why, so you can punish me?” Kor asked angrily. “I will keep it for myself. I will be the one to protect.”

An invisible force picked him up, staff and all, and hurled him into the rock wall, hundreds of feet away. Harzhan was no longer wasting words, for there would be no reasoning with him. Off in the distance, an explosion opened a gaping hole in the wall, and water rushed in.

Harzhan took one last look at Tarok. “Trust in me,” he said. “And leave while you can.”

Then, he vanished. Not instantly, but as a mist fading away. Overhead, more cracks appeared in the rock where the staff had exploded, and more water rushed in with amazing force.

Tarok went into the ship, and locked the door behind him as the walls broke down with a deafening roar. Water smashed into the island, pulverizing both the palace and the land it stood on. The lights flitted around the rubble, and then fled over the sea, disappearing over the horizon. All the debris quickly washed away, and as the ship was tossed away from the carnage via the open hole, the rock walls continued to shatter and break away. Within moments, they were gone, and only a few small rocks marked where the island once was.

After a miserable week floating at sea, the ship finally came to rest on the beach where Tarok had first landed. The slight glow of the ship faded when it touched land, and it stopped moving. It was as if it had just died.

He hadn't spoken much to the two patriarchs, who had spent most of the voyage crying. Crying for their world, their loss of innocence, and the death of Kor, whom they loved in spite of everything. Tarok felt deep shame, even though they assured him that he wasn't to blame.

The three left the ship, only to see that the Xanogar ship was half buried in the sand. A group of Liion and Miranda's children were waiting for them. They looked haggard and worn, as if the long lives they had enjoyed were no longer guaranteed to be forever.

"Mother, father," one of them called. "The pilot still lives? What of Kor?"

"Kor is dead," Liion said, sadly. "You will not harm Tarok. He had nothing to do with whatever happened."

Tarok walked over to the ship. The door was still half uncovered. He began to dig with his hands, and clear away the sand so that it could be opened. When he found out that the door was locked, he began to bang on it.

“Tarok?” he heard Tayzar say. “Is that you? I thought I saw you on the beach just now. I thought the aliens would have killed you.”

“No, I’m all right,” Tarok said. “Who else is with you?”

“Only Elnara and General Mordrak. The others are dead; the aliens have become monsters.”

“No, Tayzar,” Elnara’s voice answered grimly. “They have just learned from us.”

“Tarok, the view screen still functions, but the engines are dead,” Mordrak spoke up, ignoring Elnara’s comment. “We’re trapped here unless we can repair.”

Tarok looked warily at the angry golden ones surrounding him. “All right,” he said. “Let me in. We need to tell King Gorath what has happened.”

“I’m afraid we cannot send you another ship,” King Gorath told the image of general Mordrak on his view screen. He, Zyndatha, and Faldarian were communicating with him from the throne room in Synestra. They were as disturbed by the news as Tarok himself had been.

“Tayzar and Elnara tell me that they can’t repair the ship with only the two of them and primitive forges,” Mordrak said. “Even the engineers in Synestra took several months to build the ship using the best equipment on Xodos.”

“There are other ships being made in our factory,” Gorath informed them. “But it will be at least a year before they are ready. I’m afraid you must remain where you are, and keep us informed of the situation. Rumors are spreading of the alien’s existence, but we still need to be careful. We don’t want the planet to panic over a hostile race.”

“Yes, your majesty. We will stay in touch,” Mordrak said, clearly disappointed, but knowing there was nothing else to be done.

As the screen darkened, Faldarian turned to Gorath. “What are we to do now?” he asked. “This is a situation none of us have ever dealt with before.”

“I don’t know yet,” Gorath admitted. “For now, I’m more concerned with consolidating our power here.”

XIV

“There is a storm coming,” Tayzar said, looking up from where he was fixing a panel on their ruined spaceship. For the past year, they had been exiled. In that time, the children of Harzhan had allowed the survivors of the mission from Xodos to live, but had watched them closely. They had also dug out the spaceship from where it had been buried and forged new parts under the mechanics’ directions. Most of them simply wanted the Xanogar to leave and never return.

“There have been many lately,” Tarok confirmed, as he helped Elnara put a metal place on the outer hull. “Ever since Lord Harzhan, the Creator, vanished, the storms have increased in frequency. And in our communications with King Gorath, they say very similar things are happening on Xodos. That winters are harsher, and meteor showers more frequent.”

“Supposed Creator, you mean,” Tayzar said. “I have a hard time believing that the creator of the universe had a palace on a small moon like this one.”

“You didn’t meet him, Tayzar,” Tarok answered. “I have told you what I saw.”

“It all sounded so strange, though,” Tayzar protested. “I just cannot believe it.”

He looked up at the darkening sky. “Let us get back to the city. Liion and Miranda will be waiting for us.”

“They have been so good to us,” Elnara said as they left the ship for the day. “They at least forgave us for our leader’s actions.”

“They are good people, all right,” Tayzar agreed. “Come. General Mordrak will want an update on the progress.”

In the fields behind his city, Liion helped some of his children harvest a meager crop. He looked over the field with dismay; although the land had yielded some food, there was a large tract that was blighted. With a sigh, he threw the crops into a nearby cart, and began to pull it towards the city.

His children loaded their carts and followed. Liion wiped the sweat off of his brow and tried to ignore the soreness in his body. It had never been this hard to get food before the world had fallen away from Harzhan. Now, he had to spend most of his time simply helping in the fields. He rarely hunted anymore.

Looking up, he saw a row of other men standing guard at the edge of the field. Their hands were resting on their swords and their eyes scanned the forest for any wild hounds. Indeed, no one hunted anymore because they didn’t have too. The hounds had become so aggressive, that it was dangerous to venture out in the forests in small groups anymore, especially at night. So they had to guard the city and farm fields, and killed enough hounds in that manner.

He walked into the city, and dragged his cart to the central tower, where his people still ate their food together. In spite of everything, he would keep trying to hold things together. At all costs, they must not stray any further than they already had from Harzhan’s ways. Already, several of his children had been killed either by wild hounds or poisoned crops. Worse, some of the older ones had begun to show their age. He himself looked far older than he had a year ago.

Miranda had aged as well, especially since she now spent most of her time caring for those who fell ill. Especially Kalgar, who was now bedridden, dying from the effects of the staff being fired on him.

Some had had the cruelty to recommend letting Kalgar die, but Liion couldn't bring himself to do that. True, his son had been involved in the fall, but had only suffered a moment of weakness and doubt, as opposed to the full corruption of Kor. He shared no more blame than the other Xanogar.

Liion looked skyward. Where was Harzhan? He had said to trust, but where was he? On what was trust to be based? Why had he been given no sign?

Then, he paused. Something familiar happened then, something he hadn't felt since last year, although it seemed far longer ago. He heard Harzhan speaking in his mind.

He stopped, listened, and then smiled. "Yes," he said to the voice, although no one else had heard it. "Yes. I hear you, my lord."

Tarok and his companions made it back to the city just before the rains came down. As they entered the gates, and walked into the central meeting hall, they could hear the water pelting the outside of the building. Tired, they headed to a table where Mordrak sat, along with several other golden ones. All of them were listening to Liion, who stood at the table's head, and was speaking excitedly.

"And I say that we are not to resent the people of Xodos, for they are in the same position as we are," Liion said in a loud voice. "Like us, they once were innocent, but fell away from Harzhan. And like us, they will be saved from their own corruption by him. I have seen a vision from

Harzhan himself. In two days, he shall return, and set things back on their proper course. I am certain of it. Go out, and tell everyone."

He then sat at the table, without further comment. The crowd murmured amongst themselves for a moment, and then dispersed. Mordrak nodded at his fellow Xanogar, and waved them over to the table.

"You are back from the ship, I see," he began, wanting to clear that matter before attending to the larger one.

"Yes. It should be ready to fly home soon, sir," Tarok confirmed. "What is going on?"

"Harzhan is coming," Liion repeated. "In two days, he will be here. I cannot tell you anymore, because I myself know no more. But he will reveal himself very shortly."

Then, he stood, and walked out to join his wife and her charges, leaving the visitors to look at each other. "I wonder what he means by that," Elnara said at last.

"As do I," Mordrak agreed, and they all silently pondered the meaning of Liion's vision.

XV

Two days later, the hall was filled with people who ate their dinner in silence. The cooks brought in some beef stew made from tender lizard meat. Liion and Miranda sat down with the guests. Like all the others, she had grown older; worry lines had been etched into her forehead, and she seemed in a state of perpetual weariness. Though none said it, Liion's vision was on all their minds.

A knock sounded at the doorway, and they all looked up. Another Xanogar came in, one that none of them had seen before. He wore a simple brown tunic, and looked to be a wanderer.

"Who are you?" Mordrak demanded, standing up. "You aren't part of my party."

The children of Harzhan began to murmur again, and looked at one another. The newcomer didn't answer initially, but walked over to the Xanogar's table. Most of them shifted nervously in their seats. Mordrak stiffened, but held his ground. Liion smiled, but Tarok only felt a vague sense of familiarity, as if he knew this man from somewhere.

The Xanogar addressed Tayzar first. "You have had much pain in your life, Tayzar of Xodos," he said gently. "But let some of your suffering end now."

As he spoke, the deformities on his leg began to smooth out. New flesh appeared over the scars, and the signs of damage disappeared. Tayzar stood up, unsteadily at first, but then with more poise and confidence. Elnara smiled, and laughed softly in pleasure. She embraced him warmly as Tayzar just stood there, completely bewildered.

Liion, Miranda and Tarok bowed down to him. "Lord Harzhan, you've returned at last," Liion exclaimed.

The other golden ones bowed, and began to chant Harzhan's name. They knew his presence when they felt it. Mordrak took a step back, and looked around the room nervously.

"It's true," Tarok said. "You are Harzhan."

"I know," Elnara said softly, releasing Tayzar and approaching him. "I don't know how, but I do."

"Because after coming here, you have seen secularism for the falsehood that it is," Harzhan answered.

"So it seems," Tayzar remarked. But despite his skepticism, he couldn't deny his healing and knelt hesitantly.

"Your appearance is something I would never have expected," Tarok said.

Harzhan chuckled. “This is necessary to my plan, Tarok. Much is about to happen there.”

On Xodos, Gorath and Zyndatha gaped at the view screen. They had been discussing matters of state, when all of a sudden, a transmission came through without any announcement. It showed a hall with several golden skinned beings sitting around a table. Four Xanogar were among them; Gorath immediately recognized them as the crew that flew into space. Then suddenly, another Xanogar came in and healed Tayzar of his misshapen leg.

“What is this?” Zyndatha asked. “Where is it coming from?”

“I don’t know,” Gorath confessed. He hit a button on the throne to call up security.

“We are getting a strange transmission,” he told the technician on duty. “Is there any sign that our computers have been hacked into?”

“No, my lord,” the technician’s voice replied. “All is in order…”

He broke off as something caught his attention. “My lord…we are getting something as well. Something with…what are they? Golden skinned people?”

The king and his henchman exchanged a glance. All of the palace was getting the transmission. On their screen, Harzhan spoke once again to the crowd.

“I am Harzhan, ruler of Kayraan, and the same as the one whom the Xanogar call the Creator. Long ago, I created the people of Xodos to serve me. But in their selfishness and arrogance, they turned away. And by the First Law, which called for simply doing what I commanded, they doomed themselves to separation from me. Sin, disease, and death followed. It became necessary to save them from their own choices, so I created the golden people to make way for the final battle against evil.”

Harzhan seemed to look at whatever camera was recording this message, and look straight at Gorath. His eye seemed to stare right into his own heart and soul, and Gorath felt afraid. He felt naked, as though everything he was and everything he desired was unfolded before this strange man, and he had nowhere to hide.

“Master,” the technician continued. “We are getting reports from security officials in the city. Other people are getting this transmission as well.”

“Who is getting it?” Gorath asked, trying to shake off his sudden unease.

There was a pause. “I think every video transmitter in the city,” he answered softly. “If not all the cities.”

In his own chambers, Faldarian sat transfixed at the strange sight. A video of the distant moon was being broadcast, apparently all over his city. Although he had been informed of the aliens’ existence, along with Lord Zyndatha, it had been agreed to keep that fact hidden from the general public. As far as anyone knew, their spaceflight was still off exploring. Why would King Gorath change his mind and send this feed after all?

But as he gazed at the monitor, he felt a sense of awe and wonder that no other person had ever inspired in him before. No. It wasn’t Gorath. It was this Harzhan; somehow he knew that this transmission was being sent directly from Harzhan.

As if hearing his thought, Harzhan looked directly at him from the monitor. Faldarian could have sworn that he saw him nod subtly at him. But he couldn’t see the aging nobleman here, could he?

“Some of you have asked why evil must have come into the world,” Harzhan continued. “Do I punish you? Do you bring evil on yourselves? Or is it because the world itself has been poisoned by sin, and you must deal with the consequences of that? The answer is all at once. Such things must occur so that you learn to rely on me alone and not on your own strengths. For only then, do you truly grow strong.”

“Shut this transmission down,” Gorath ordered. “Run interference, do whatever it takes to block it.”

“I can’t, my lord,” the technician protested. “There is no signal that we can detect, thus nothing to block. We see the signal, but our displays show nothing out of the ordinary. Even the computers that show being off are running it.”

“Without power?” Gorath demanded. “That’s impossible. Have one of the off palace security offices disconnect from the computer network. See if that cuts off the transmission.”

“I have come to bring you back from corruption,” Harzhan continued. “I offer you a new choice. I myself will pay the price of breaking the First Law. I myself will atone for your transgressions. I myself will give you a choice that will give the chance for good a reality. Join me now, then you will be redeemed and be able to stand at my side.”

“No change, master,” The technician informed Gorath. “The deactivated office is still receiving the transmission.”

“What is this?” Zyndatha asked. “It sounds like the Creator worshippers fables.”

“I know what it sounds like,” Gorath snapped, still shaken by the uncanny experience, and dismayed that he couldn’t stop it from happening. The secret of the aliens would be out now; there was no longer any way to hide it. How would the people react? For that matter, how would they react to this talk of the Creator? He didn’t know, and he didn’t like unknown factors. Who was this strange person?

“Your decision to serve must remain a true one. Therefore, you will decide for yourselves whether or not to serve me. Not merely to be moral, but to give me your loyalty. Who will make the choice now?”

The screen went dark, and Faldarian stared at it, amazed. Could this be true? Was this the prophecy of the Creator returning from space? It sounded strangely similar to the things Takozan had tried to tell him about.

As if on cue, he heard a knock at his door. He opened it, and saw his commander, beaming and almost shaking with joy. “Did you see it, my lord?” he asked eagerly. “Did you see the news?”

He nodded slowly. “Yes, Takozan,” he confirmed quietly. “I saw it.”

XVI

“I wished to talk to you in private because I had more questions about your beliefs,” Mordrak said several hours later.

He was in the guest dwelling now with the other Xanogar, including the mysterious one who claimed to be Harzhan. He had no idea who he was, and wanted to find out. The aliens had had a feast with what remaining food they had. They were ecstatic and seemed to have no question that

this man was their god and king. Indeed, it had been only now that they had finally retired for the night and Mordrak could get a private moment with the stranger.

“Very well. Ask them,” Harzhan replied as they all sat around a fire.

“Do you really believe yourself to be the Creator of legend?” Mordrak demanded.

“I and the Creator are one, “Harzhan confirmed.

“Which is why you say one must join you,” Mordrak answered. “But if that were not true, what would you say to the idea that one could be moral without you?”

“They could be moral,” Harzhan said. “However, they wouldn’t be good.”

“Explain,” Mordrak said.

“Morality is important, to be sure, and will partially determine your reward,” Harzhan replied. “But mere morality is only half your task. To be truly good, you must be completely selfless. That is why you must choose to serve me. Otherwise, your morality is arbitrary, if not self directed. Ultimately, such morality will fail, because you would abandon it as soon as you saw an advantage in doing so.”

“Interesting theory,” Mordrak commented. “But with all due respect, it only works if one believes you are who you say you are.”

“I can assure you that he is,” Tarok spoke up. “He is the same as the one I met on the island. I know it. He showed me things there, past and future, that go beyond description.”

“Perhaps,” Mordrak said thoughtfully. “But I must think on these things further.”

He stood up, and nodded respectfully at Harzhan. “Thank you. With your permission, I will go to sleep. It has been a long day.”

Harzhan’s eye met his, and they held each other’s gaze for some time, as if Harzhan was staring through him. “You will do what you will,” he told him quietly.

Mordrak’s eye dropped its gaze and the general left the room.

The palace and Gorath’s forces had been flooded with questions from the common people, asking about both Kayraan and this Harzhan. Meanwhile, Creator worshippers had taken to the streets singing praises and proclaiming that their prophecy was fulfilled at long last. Worse, some of the common people were beginning to listen to them. It threatened everything Gorath had always believed in and he was about to propose a bold counter action. So he had called Zyndatha and Faldarian to his throne room to discuss things further.

“My lords, I don’t think I need to tell you why we are here,” he began. “As you know, our entire computer network has been compromised. Dangerous lies are being spread, and…”

“Do you think they are lies?” Faldarian asked. “This is strange, but I don’t feel as though we’ve been threatened.”

“My lord, a signal that couldn’t be cut off was beamed into every computer on Xodos,” Gorath argued. “How could you say that?”

“There have been no reports of malfunctioning equipment or stolen bank accounts,” Faldarian said. “Wouldn’t someone who hacked our computer network do something more along those lines? Even if this was an elaborate diversion, there has been nothing happening while we were dealing with it.”

“There is rioting in the streets.”

“There is peaceful assembly. People are happy, not angry.”

“You are known for your wisdom, my lord. Surely you can see how the Creator worshippers beliefs run counter to our own. In the past, they were harmless eccentrics, but now.” Gorath narrowed his eyes. “Now they all of a sudden have credibility.”

“We have to do something to contain this,” Zyndatha agreed. “Something that will remind people that we are still their rulers. Not a mythical Creator nor anyone else. The question is what?”

“Lord Zyndatha and I have taken the liberty of calling our air shuttles that have been converted to space flight to the factory where our large spaceship has been built,” Gorath told Faldarian. “It will be ready to launch within days, and is capable of carrying both the shuttles and a legion of our soldiers.”

“What will that do?” Faldarian asked. “You wish to impose martial law on the city? To stop the assemblies in the streets?”

“I believe we need more than that,” Gorath said. “We need to demonstrate our newfound strength, but provide an example in such a way that won’t make the populace feel immediately threatened. Therefore, I propose we go to the third moon ourselves to deal with the source of these rumors.”

“We can retrieve our stranded men, and ensure that the aliens will propose no threat at the same time,” Zyndatha said.

“What exactly are you saying?” Faldarian demanded. “Do you mean to attack the farthest moon? Our people assured us that the people there were primitive. How could they threaten us, or be behind the sabotage as you call it?”

“I would hope it wouldn’t come to that,” Gorath said. “But if it did, we would be prepared to raze their forests to the ground. Then we would return to Xodos as conquerors and heroes. None would ever question us with both victory and firepower behind us.”

“No,” Faldarian said, shaking his head. “I have never been part of attacking the innocent, and will not start now. I can’t…”

“We will prepare to go to Kayraan ourselves in three days. You will call your shuttle forces here and join us. Lord Zyndatha, you will stay behind with a portion of our forces and watch over Synestra. But the rest of us, the rulers of Xodos, will lead the people in their greatest victory.”

XVII

“Tarok, wake up. We have much to do today,” Harzhan said.

Tarok got out of bed, and looked at him, fuzzily. His sleep had been troubled by dreams he now couldn’t remember. “What is it, master?”

“We need to see Kalgar. Then, we must journey to the mines beyond the city. There is something there you all must see.”

They walked into the banquet hall, where Miranda and Liion ate breakfast with Tayzar, Elnara, and Mordrak. As they ate, Harzhan told them his plans.

“With all due respect, why should I follow you?” Tayzar asked Harzhan.

“Tayzar! How can you say such a thing? We are in the presence of our Creator,” Elnara protested.

“How is it you have become convinced so quickly?” Tayzar asked. He looked back at Harzhan, who remained silent.

“He healed you, did he not?” she countered. “Do you not believe your own eyes?”

“I’m grateful for that, Elnara,” he answered. “But I’ve seen many things I cannot explain. I don’t know how to interpret them.”

Her frown deepened at his persistent stubbornness. “You will do as you will, then. But I go with Lord Harzhan.”

They finished their breakfast in an uneasy silence. Then, Harzhan stood up, embraced Liion and Miranda, and began to walk away. Tarok and Elnara followed him out.

“Good bye my friends,” Tarok told the alien couple. “I will come back here as soon as I can.”

Elnara scowled at Tayzar darkly. He sighed and reluctantly followed her, ignoring the smiles of the two behind him. Mordrak followed as well.

Harzhan turned to speak to them. “You have not given your hearts to me yet,” he said softly. “But you are moving in the right direction.”

Tayzar looked down, not wanting to answer him, not knowing what to believe about him.

Later, they were in another part of the city, approaching a stone building that had been built away from the other dwellings. Within, lay sick old man, Kalgar after his brother had shot him. He had sickened faster than most of the others due to his direct exposure, and had also been shunned; many blamed him as much as they did the aliens.

His eyes were closed, and his breathing appeared much labored, but the man heard the sound of footsteps, and looked at them, trying to focus, but having great difficulty. However, something seemed to recognize his old master, and his lined face smiled warmly.

“Harzhan,” he said, his voice sounding like dry paper. “You are here, at last.”

Harzhan looked upon him with a mixture of love and sadness. “Kalgar,” he whispered tenderly. “My faithful servant. You at least, never left me.”

Kalgar looked down slightly, as they all knelt down by his bed. “Master, forgive me, but I am not blameless, either. I didn’t listen when I heard your voice warning against Kane. Now, I am dying for it.”

“You became tainted, as all did,” Harzhan said. “But you never left. You are forgiven.”

Kalgar smiled again. “Dear master,” he said, his voice getting weaker.

Harzhan gently placed a hand on his head. “Rest now,” he said quietly. Then he removed his hands, and let nature do what it would.

Kalgar shut his eyes without fear, and slowly breathed his last. Harzhan shook his head and began to weep softly. Tayzar, who was farthest from him at the end of the bed, leaned over to Elnara.

“He is crying,” he whispered, not knowing whether to feel pity or scorn. “I’ve never seen a man cry.”

“It's because he loved him,” Elnara retorted softly, still irritated at his skepticism. “Because he loves us all.”

Harzhan eventually stood up and wiped away his tears. “I mourn for the loss of innocence, Tayzar. The emergence of evil, and the price we must all pay for it.”

“Then why not heal him?” Tayzar asked.

“So he would not see the strife that is to come,” Harzhan whispered softly.

XVIII

Over the city of Synestra, Gorath's large cylindrical warship hovered over the factory. Its docking bays at its base were open and shuttles were flying into it. Once loaded, the bay doors would close, and it would rise up to begin its master's attack.

Like the smaller ship that had left before, this one had the same basic layout. Command centers were at the front, living quarters at the lower decks, engineering in the rear, and in the upper middle decks was a large open area that housed a garden, in case plants needed to be grown for long term space travel. The perimeter was lined with hibernation chambers that would also house passengers for unspecified periods of time.

For that much of the first voyage had succeeded. The data from the initial experiments had been passed on and expanded so that longer space voyages, perhaps even out of the solar system, were at least a possibility. The chances now that more could be gained from the venture had increased considerably, once the problem of the distant moon was dealt with.

From the bridge, Lord Faldarian stood next to Gorath, who was seated in a replica of his throne. Below they could see crowds of onlookers pointing and shouting to themselves in both curiosity and trepidation. For Gorath had not announced this mission, unlike the first, feeling that it would serve them better to return with their mission completed. That way, there would be no protests only, he hoped, newly unquestioning obedience.

Faldarian still hated this course of action, feeling that it would simply end in a battle that he neither wanted nor felt was needed. As the final shuttles entered the ship, King Gorath signaled his pilot to raise the ship into the air. They would take a shorter, straighter journey, bypassing the first two moons. Not only was the situation more urgent now, but also the king's astronomers had

noted that the storms around the second moon had increased in intensity and violence. They had even threatened to leave the atmosphere entirely, so it was no longer safe to approach.

Faldarian felt his ears popping, but otherwise had no ill effects as the view screen showed the city getting smaller and smaller. Then, the bow pointed upwards towards the thinning sky. Soon, the rings became visible, and the old nobleman felt his spirits lift in spite of it all. Never would he have ever thought in his youth that he would be the witness of such sights. As for what awaited him, he would find out soon enough.

The mines were nearly an hour away from the city and fields without mounts to carry them there. Harzhan led the four Xanogar on foot down the dirt road to the mountains. In the past, the road had more traffic as the children of Harzhan went more often to mine ore for the blacksmiths' forges in the city.

But after the fall, not only did they have less time to make metal tools, but also the wild hounds made the road far more dangerous. Indeed, they heard the barking of the beasts in the distance, and felt unnerved. Fortunately, none came close, owing to the presence of Harzhan protecting them, although he remained silent and pensive.

Eventually, they made it to the foothills of the mountains, and saw the path lead up to a well worn opening. Walking inside, they grabbed torches stashed of to the side and lit them. Soon, they walked into the mine.

The walls were pockmarked with holes where the golden ones had taken their raw material. But the floors were smooth and the descent into the mountain was only a gradual slope, so that the trek proved easy enough to walk. Indeed, in the cool darkness, they could have almost felt at ease, if not for Harzhan's demeanor.

After several minutes, Harzhan led them down a tunnel on the left. Then, they came up to a dead end, where they were forced to stop.

Harzhan turned to them, his face strangely sullen. “I have spoken to you about having to atone for your transgressions. How this unfolds, you will soon see. First, you will need to see the price that must be paid, the place that came to be because of the fall.

Behind him, the wall began to crumble. Falling rocks revealed another tunnel, this one filled with black mist. The four stepped backward, feeling the darkness as well as seeing it.

“Master, I…” Tarok began.

“What is it?” Harzhan asked.

“Nothing.”

“No, it was something.”

“I don’t want to go in there.”

The others nodded; even Mordrak agreed with the pilot on this. Harzhan put his hand on Tarok’s shoulder. “”I will protect you from them.”

“Who?” Tarok asked, but Harzhan didn’t reply. He simply led them through the mist. Tarok felt coldness creep up his spine just as hot steam hit his face. A sense of vague, undirected fear came into his mind as well, and he clung close to his master. Behind him, Elnara grabbed onto him, the others onto her.

Presently, they were through the mists, and Tarok could see the terrain clearly. Jagged rocks and mountains gave way to a sky filled with storms of fire. There was no sun or stars as far as he

could see. They were on the bank of a river which contained foul smelling black sludge instead of water. He realized that they were back on the second moon.

Along this, they walked, all of them looking around them nervously. For they felt that they weren't alone in this place. That unseen eyes tracked them, perhaps even stalked them. Tarok remembered the shadows he had seen near the river, and had the unpleasant feeling that now he would find out what they were.

"Help," a voice called softly behind them.

The all whirled around, except for Harzhan, who turned more slowly. A haggard Xanogar man in tattered clothes stood before them. His head was down, and he was muttering to himself.

"Who are you?" Tayzar asked.

"Help me please." The man looked up, and they jumped again. His eyes were solid black. No whites, just solid inky black. Black that was devoid of any feelings except for greed. And anger.

The black eyed man took a step forward. "Come with me," he said. "It won't take long. I need your help."

Tayzar trembled, but took a step towards him. Elnara, however, grabbed his arm, and he blinked, seeming to come out of a temporary daze. Tarok simply stood frozen, feeling icy fear at the sight of the man and those eyes. He wished Harzhan would do something to help him.

"Why don't you come with us?" Harzhan asked. "I know you are unhappy here," Harzhan said, taking a step closer. "Let me help you, for I am your Creator."

At that, the man looked down, and closed his eyes. Blackened tears leaked through his closed eyelids, and some of Tarok's fear gave way to pity. Indeed, when the man looked up, his eyes seemed slightly less black, and his lips trembled.

“Come,” Harzhan said. “Leave this place.”

The man seemed on the verge of coming with them, although the other Xanogar still felt afraid of him. But the man’s demeanor changed from sadness to anger then, and the feelings of dread returned.

“What Creator?” the black eyed man demanded. “There is no such thing! And even if you were, what then? I wasn’t so bad in life. I never hurt anyone or caused any trouble. So why do I need you?”

“Because your service is still to yourself.”

“I need no one! I’ll not submit to you or any other,” the Xanogar retorted. Then, with a small cry, he turned and dove into the river. He never resurfaced, and Tarok couldn’t say what happened to him.

Harzhan shook his head sadly, and led them down the river bank. They all looked around them warily. Off in the distance, they heard sounds of fighting, screams and moans. Sometimes, other black eyed men and women would draw close to them, asking for help, and then getting angry and storming off when the party either ignored them or Harzhan offered freedom to them. What they would’ve done to them had the Creator not been with them, they never knew.

“This isn’t what you expected, is it?” Harzhan asked after a moment.

“No. I always imagined people sorry for their bad choices and misspent lives, but the Creator not allowing them to leave,” Elnara confessed. “Before I met you and believed in you myself.”

“I didn’t know, but trusted the Creators judgment,” Tarok said.

“You must not think, even for a moment, that I have any perverse amusement over this,” Harzhan said gravely. “I did not create a torture chamber, as an evil man would.”

Tarok though for several minutes as they continued their trek towards a black hill that seemed to be the source of the river. “They torture themselves here; it is not you who does so.”

“They will not turn to me, so I had to either destroy them utterly or leave them to their own wishes, away from where they could continue to harm creation,” Harzhan confirmed. “Only they won’t accept that their struggle is fruitless. They have followed selfish or arrogant ways so extensively that the positive aspects of their personalities have atrophied. They have become anger and fear. And the worst have become malice and lust for power.”

Mordrak and Tayzar looked at one another, and then at Harzhan. The others could see the conflict on their faces as they assessed their lifelong beliefs and felt them crumbling. Tayzar huddled in closer to Elnara, and she put an arm around him. He didn’t know what to believe yet, only that he was safer closer to Harzhan than away from him. For they noticed that the further away they moved away from him, the more uncomfortable they felt. They felt not only was it harder to think, but also, their bodies seemed to become sluggish and sore. Tarok remembered that without the Creator’s presence to sustain their minds and give health to their bodies, they only had pain and horror left.

Mordrak, however, set his jaw and looked at Harzhan with accusation. “How is it you show us these things, I don’t know,” he said. “It’s impressive the lengths you go to, to convince us that you are the Creator and your words are true.”

“You know nothing of the lengths I will soon go to,” Harzhan replied, frowning at him. “But lying isn’t one of them.”

“No? A tunnel of death, lost souls with black eyes trying to get us if we don’t obey you?” He snorted with deliberate loudness. “It will take more than that to convince me, a loyal, rational officer in the king’s army.” He pointed at Tayzar. “I’ve seen miracles I can’t explain, but how do I know you didn’t have their cooperation? I want to feel a miracle. Let us leave this place. Show me your power, right now. I’m not afraid.”

But he was, and his words rang hollow even to him. They could all see that his bravado concealed the fear that the Creator really stood before him after all. No, that couldn’t be. He knew how the universe worked; had always known. He knew his duty too, both to the king and to himself.

Then, he blinked, and he was no longer on the second moon. Mordrak looked around to find that he was standing in the center of Liion’s city. The sun was out, and there were people going about their business. Some of them stopped to look at him curiously, and Mordrak stumbled down the main path to the city’s edge facing the beach.

He didn’t know fully where he was going, but had only one thought. Creator or no, Harzhan had genuine powers. He had felt it, as well as witnessed it. What then? Submit? Renounce his earlier views and perhaps even his rank, with all the respect and power that it had given him?

No, he thought. A decision came into his mind. Not that. Anything but that. I have my duty. It is to King Gorath. Yes, he will know what to do.

He walked out of the city, and warily made his way for the beach. Despite the increase in hounds, he would reach their ship and contact the king.

“Mordrak is safe, and away from me,” Harzhan told the others. They were still standing by the black river, and had seen Mordrak disappear. “He will do what he will.”

They continued to walk until they came to the foothills of the black hill. People in hooded cloaks walked in and out, taking little or no notice of them. Unlike the other black eyed Xanogar, they seemed preoccupied with other things than simply luring victims.

“The patriarch lives here,” Harzhan whispered. “Those you see are his servants. Come.”

They walked inside, seeing that the cave under the hill had several rooms on either side of the main corridor. Tarok, Tayzar and Elnara looked on either side into these, and saw hooded ones in each room painting words on the walls with an ink brush. They didn’t have time to read what was being written, but they seemed like questions. Below them, in small glowing letters, answers appeared, and some of these they could read. The answers were disturbing, and seemed to carry with them a similar answer. Harzhan breaks his own laws, the words said.

Finally, they reached the end of the corridor. An ink brush and basin was tucked away in the corner of the wall. Here, the darkness was palpable, and Tarok took his master’s arm and clung to him. For he felt that he was being watched, even though he could see nothing. Even the hooded people stayed in their own rooms and made no attempt to stop Harzhan as he picked up the brush and began to write himself on the wall.

I, the Creator, am here, he wrote.

An answer appeared instantly below it, in glowing letters. Then you come to break your own laws, they said once again.

I do nothing of the sort, Harzhan wrote back. I created you and you were my friend for many ages until you imprisoned yourself here.

You speak as if you were good, the letters appeared. But you want all authority for yourself. You demand that I be only as you wish me to be. But I am no longer what I once was. I am not even Xanogar. I am power, and I am strength.

“No,” Tarok said, audibly. “You lie. Harzhan showed me the way Xodos was. You had power, but good unsullied power. And yet you still wanted more than you were given. You are self centered and foolish!”

If it was possible, the area around them grew even darker. They saw nothing, but felt the anger and malice around them increase.

You think he is honest? The words appeared on the wall. For it seemed that whatever, or whomever, was writing them could hear without having responses written. In the beginning, when he created us and gave us free will, he also gave us the First Law. This law stated that all intelligent beings would choose either to serve him or else die and be banished. Then, they are mine.

I whisper to my children constantly, persuading them to join us, the words continued. I encouraged Akanton’s ideas. They are not unlike my own thinking. Harzhan may also whisper to you, but he is too gentle to notice.

Now, he defeats himself. If he breaks the First Law, he proves himself a liar, an inconsistent and unpredictable opportunist who cannot be trusted. If he keeps it, then I get all in the end, because all have fallen. He cannot have it both ways. He cannot be fully merciful and fully just at the same time. Either way, I will speak against him and turn the people even further to me. He has lost.

“Enough!” Harzhan shouted, his eye blazing. “You speak as if you know all! Where were you when I first laid the foundations of the universe? Answer if you can, or be silent.”

The words vanished and the wall went blank. The patriarch’s presence waited as Harzhan continued.

“There is indeed a way to keep both my children and the First Law. I saw it from the beginning when I stepped back to see all of my creation. I myself will pay the price. I myself will die.”

The three living Xanogar gasped, and looked at Harzhan in disbelief. But they had no time to respond. A ghostly image emerged on the wall. The ghost lunged at them, but seemed trapped in the wall, and could only look at them with head cocked to the side.

Elnara screamed, Tayzar shut his eye, but Tarok only stared, frozen. This was the patriarch, and his face was more hideous than he could have ever imagined. His eyes were also black, with a magnetism that seemed to pull one into them and smother all feelings of love or happiness. He had no nose; only sunken holes and his mouth was both toothless and lipless. His entire face seemed to be a hole to pull his children into and his movements were jerky and more animal than man. Tarok saw that a ghost was indeed no longer a man, but the menacing and pathetic remnant of one.

Harzhan grabbed them then, and the view disappeared. They blinked, and saw that they were seated back in Liion’s banquet hall, with the sun shining outside and the cool breeze blowing in. Tarok had to take several deep breaths before he found that he could think clearly again.

“That face,” Elnara said. She hugged herself and shuddered. “That horrible face.”

Tarok understood perfectly; he would never forget the visage of the damned, although Harzhan’s presence made it more bearable. Harzhan sensed his thought, and put a hand on his shoulder. Then he embraced Elnara, and she leaned against him, taking comfort from him. In silence, Tayzar sat and watched them, not retreating but not coming either.

“Mordrak is fortunate to not have seen that,” he said at last.

“Maybe,” Tarok said. “Or maybe it would have been what made him believe.”

“Or made him harden his heart further,” Tayzar countered. He paused, surprised at his own words. They just seemed to come out of him, and the other three turned to look at him.

“Where is Mordrak?” Tayzar asked, quickly trying to change the subject.

At the beach, Mordrak entered the shuttle. No one was in the area, so he entered unseen. Walking up to the view screen, he activated it. He was greeted by an image of Lord Zyndatha.

“General, what is happening?” the nobleman asked.

Mordrak blinked, not expecting Gorath’s henchman. “Where is King Gorath?” he replied. “I have important news.”

“He is en route to you as we speak,” Zyndatha answered, with a slight smirk. “You have been out of touch. Not only is the larger ship completed, but the entire planet has received word of Harzhan.”

“You know of Harzhan?” Mordrak asked, surprised. “But how? I haven’t had the chance to contact you before now.”

“We were hoping you would be able to tell us,” Zyndatha said. “A transmission was beamed all over Xodos. It showed an unknown Xanogar calling himself the Creator and healing one of your men. He was preaching his return, and we couldn’t stop it.”

“Connect me with the king,” the general said.

Zyndatha nodded, and hit a button. A second image appeared beside his, one showing King Gorath and Lord Faldarian on the bridge of a ship.

“My lords,” he greeted with a bow. “I have been informed by Lord Zyndatha of the latest news. I have some of my own, for I have met and spoken with Lord Harzhan.”

“What did you find out?” Gorath asked. “Tell me.”

“My lord, he is dangerous,” Mordrak said with a snarl. “I understand you somehow saw his arrival. He showed me illusions as well. He is brainwashing my remaining people with his words, and performed a healing. He may well be planning to oppose us.”

“Your remaining people,” Gorath echoed. “Two of them were maintenance workers. Could they have been the ones that sent the message?”

“I don’t see how, my lords,” Mordrak answered. “They were with me when Harzhan appeared. Of course…”

Mordrak trailed off, and thought back to when they had first arrived on the farthest moon. “Wait,” he said. “The pilot, Tarok, did get separate from us for a time. And he went off to meet with someone whom he claimed was Harzhan.”

“Very interesting,” Gorath said, thoughtfully. “Very interesting indeed. Perhaps we need to speak with our people personally. I would very much like to hear what they have to say.”

Mordrak nodded. “What are your orders?”

“I will send a shuttle ahead,” Gorath decided. “They are faster than the main ship, and should be there in about a day. Do you think you can have the pilot and mechanics together?”

“Yes my lord,” he answered. “I will try to get Harzhan as well. However, he is clever, so I cannot promise anything.”

“Do what you must. Where should we send the shuttle?”

Mordrak punched in a few commands in his computer. “Here are the coordinates. I will see you soon, my lord.”

XIX

The next morning, after breakfast had been served and the golden ones had gone to their tasks, Mordrak approached Harzhan and the other Xanogar.

“I wish to speak with you once again,” he told the Creator. “Will you walk to the beach with me?”

Harzhan looked at him, and seemed to stare through him. “I will come,” Harzhan answered gravely. “I will go because I must.”

His voice had a sadness that none of them had ever heard before, and Elnara stepped forward to embrace him, but he shook his head. They all walked to the stables and rode a group of mounts to the beach. For a long time, they rode in silence, but Mordrak looked skyward, as though searching.

Finally, he spoke. “Why do you say you must die, Harzhan?”

“I have told you. To both pay the price the First Law demands and give you the chance to return to me. Ask forgiveness in my name and my sacrifice will pay for you.”

“Why isn’t belief and right action enough?”

“It isn’t a simple matter of your good deeds outweighing your bad. It is a matter of allegiance and repentance.” Harzhan looked at him, and his face was troubled. “Do you really think if I granted salvation based on good deeds it would mean more people with me in the end? Some would say yes, but the minute you make that the criteria for salvation, the next question is what to do with the people who are only a few deeds short? Or those who begin too late in life?

Would it still not mean that some are saved, some are unsaved, and some accuse me of unfairness."

He shook his head, and looked skyward himself. "No, I will look at your overall heart, and that must be with me. So I say again, make me your savior. Ask forgiveness and call on my name."

In the distant sky, they heard a low rumble. The others looked up in surprise, for it was a sound they hadn't heard in a long time. It was the sound of an engine. A dark speck appeared in the sky. Tarok watched, amazed, as he saw another shuttle coming towards the beach. Their rescue had come at last, but now after everything they had seen, he wasn't sure how to feel.

"You may explain it to our king," Mordrak said, as they reached their shuttle. The new ship grew larger as it approached. Soon, it landed, and the door opened.

A group of soldiers emerged, all of them brandishing swords and wrist lasers. Tarok's mixed feelings gave way to fear. Something was wrong; this wasn't a simple rescue. It looked as though they were being arrested.

"General Mordrak, greetings," the front guard said. "King Gorath awaits." He looked at the others, and the four found wrist lasers being pointed at them. "You will step off your beasts slowly, and walk single file into the shuttle. You will only speak when spoken to, and will make no threatening moves."

"General?" Tarok asked. "What is going on? Why are…"

"Silence," Mordrak ordered. "I summoned these men after the incident in the mines. I was informed by Gorath himself that a transmission from Kayraan of Harzhan's arrival was sent all over Xodos. Every computer in the planet was hacked with that broadcast." His eyes narrowed at

them. “I had nothing to do with it. But my companions are a Creator worshipper, a self styled Creator, and two others who have intimate knowledge of machines and electronics.”

“Wait, you don’t think we did that?” Tayzar demanded. “I didn’t even know about any broadcast.”

“How could we hack even one computer, let alone every computer in the world?” Elnara added. “How indeed?” Mordrak asked.

“We have been loyal subjects of King Gorath all our lives,” Tarok said.

“Then you should have nothing to hide, pilot,” Mordrak retorted. “When we get to the ship, I will be debriefed, and then you will be questioned. Now, step down and make no attempt to resist.”

Harzhan, who had been silent, jumped off his mount first, and walked slowly towards the men. They trained their lasers on him, but he held up his hands, and looked down.

“I will come,” he said, softly. “I must. The others will as well.”

Tayzar, Tarok and Elnara looked at each other for a moment, considering. But what were they to do? Harzhan himself had given up without a fight. What chances had they?

“Master,” Tarok began.

Harzhan looked at them, and his brow furrowed. “If this wasn’t my plan, don’t you think I could stop it instantly?” he asked.

Reluctantly, they jumped down onto the sand, and let themselves be captured.

The shuttle approached the large cylinder shaped ship, which was hovering near the graveyard of deactivated probes. Gorath had ordered that they wait for their scouts to return before making their next move. Harzhan and company sat in the cramped passenger section with Mordrak and the others standing over them. This shuttle was smaller than the one they had journeyed to Kayraan in, being only a modified air shuttle. Clearly, the king had concentrated most of his efforts in the warship before them.

The ship docked, and they were hustled out. Tarok blinked, struggling to see in the dimmer yellow light. For he had been on the third moon so long, that he had nearly forgotten the lower lights of Xodos that the ship was mimicking.

More soldiers were standing in the bay, both to guard the other air shuttles and to escort the prisoners to the brig. Tarok looked around nervously, wondering what would happen, and how this would fit with Harzhan's plan. He was so uneasy, that he failed to notice an elderly nobleman and his loyal guard watching the party from the shadows.

XX

For several hours, they sat on the floor of their cell. Mordrak had already left them, and was talking with Gorath. The remaining four didn't even have a mat or chair to sit on, so they had to make themselves as comfortable as they could with nothing. Tayzar and Elnara spoke in low voices. Tarok paced the door, still uneasy, but trusting in Harzhan for a miracle.

But Harzhan gave no indication that he would perform another miracle. Indeed, he had said nothing since they had been arrested. The others had tried to talk to him, but he had only looked at them with a glare that commanded them to stop speaking. Now, he sat in silence, his eyes closed and his face tense, with a fear that Tarok had never imagined the Creator could ever feel. It

shook his own confidence, as he remembered the face of the patriarch. He shuddered; that evil one couldn't possibly be right. Could he?

They heard footsteps outside the door. Two or three low voices could be heard conversing outside. It was at this moment that Harzhan stood.

"Come in Lord Faldarian," he said, loudly. "I have little time, but we may speak for a moment."

"Faldarian?" Elnara asked. "As in Lord Faldarian? Advisor to kings?"

"Yes," Faldarian confirmed as he walked in. A soldier was at his side, as the guard peered into the cell curiously before looking around the hall and shutting the door.

"But keep your voice down, madam," Faldarian continued as he stepped in. "I'm not supposed to be here."

"What are you talking about?" Tayzar asked, too frightened by everything to remember how to address a member of court. "What's going on?"

"I will explain to Lord Harzhan," Faldarian said. He pointed to his guard, who bowed low. "Takozan, my servant, is a believer in the Creator, and wished to see if you are indeed the prophecy fulfilled. Gorath fears that you are, and is planning on attacking the far moon as we speak. I think it more than likely that he will kill all of you too."

"Tell me, Faldarian," Harzhan said. "Why do you feel obliged to warn me?"

"Because I don't agree with attacking the innocent…"

"No, there is more," Harzhan interrupted. "Why do you come here?"

Faldarian sighed. Obviously Harzhan wasn't going to let him try and stay neutral. Then again, that did keep in line with the Creator's character.

"My lord, I am old, and will probably not be alive in ten years. Yet, I realize that my life has ultimately been for nothing. What do my riches and authority matter when I finally perish?"

Harzhan said nothing, and neither did any of the others. They merely listened, so he continued.

"But what you say, it give me hope," Faldarian said emphatically. "I have searched all my life for answers, and they have pointed to you. Many on Xodos believe so as well. Even some on this ship, some of my men, do. I want to help. The guard outside and the current shift of guards in the docking bay are loyal to me."

"Are you with us then?" Harzhan asked. His tone conveyed emotion, but still demanded an answer.

Faldarian paused. To say yes would be to forsake everything he had, and possibly even risk death. And yet, what could he do? He had no other choice for hope. Indeed, why else had he handpicked the guard for this shift if he wasn't prepared to take a risk?

"I am with you, lord," Faldarian said, bowing his head.

"Then be comforted, Faldarian," Harzhan said. "But you must leave now. Take the others with you and do what you will. I must remain here."

The door opened again, and the young guard peered in. "My lord, Mordrak is coming!" he said tensely.

"Go," Harzhan repeated. "I must stay and do that for which I came here. You must go alone?"

“What master, what are we to do?” Tarok asked.

“Remember what you have seen and heard,” Harzhan answered. “Now leave!”

Faldarian and Takozan led them out into the hall while Harzhan sat down again. The young guard shut the door and joined them as they walked down the hall. Mordrak and another group of soldiers rounded the corner, and saw them.

“You! Stop right there!” Mordrak shouted.

Takozan quickly whipped out a wrist laser, and shot several blasts. Mordrak ducked, but one of the others was hit, making them all cry out. Before they could get over the shock, their prey was running down the hall. Mordrak sent half of his men after them while he opened the cell, having noted that Harzhan wasn’t among the escapees.

Sure enough, there Harzhan sat, looking at them with his piercing eyes. “Harzhan! Put your hands on your head. Make no sudden movements, or you die!”

Harzhan obeyed as they surrounded him, still brandishing their lasers and swords. “What are the others doing?” Mordrak demanded. “I saw Lord Faldarian among them.”

“I cannot say,” Harzhan answered mildly, hiding the tension he had shown among his followers.

One of Mordrak’s men hit him in the face. “Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear,” Mordrak snarled. “What are they doing?”

“Escaping,” Harzhan replied truthfully.

“Impudent wretch!” another soldier growled, kicking him in the stomach.

“Let us go to Gorath,” Mordrak called out. “Send a message to the docking bay. They won’t get away without a fight.”

XXI

Faldarian and company reached the docking bay. First, they had to cross the garden areas of the ship, and Tarok saw that they were much larger than the one in his piloted vessel. He looked up, and in the distance, saw the ceiling and command centers of the ship. It was so high up, that the artificial atmosphere had actually developed cloud and mist covers, so it almost looked like a planetary surface. Almost. He shuddered to think that Gorath would consider not only putting colonies in space, but even beyond Xodos. For then the corruption of his world would only spread further and further from its source.

Looking around, they saw a half dozen guards at the other end. When they saw their lord, they bowed their heads.

“My lord, we are here as you requested,” one spoke up.

Faldarian looked around and saw about a dozen shuttles. “I will need you to take five of these and follow me,” he ordered. “We will take a sixth.”

They heard footsteps, and turned around. Some of Mordrak’s men appeared in the hallway beyond. “Get them!” one called out. “They are enemies of the king!”

Takozan ran to the wall, hit a button, and a heavy door closed over the hall. The angry soldiers began pounding and shooting to get in.

“We don’t have much time,” he said.

They all ran into a shuttle, closing the door. More shots pelted the door as the barrier began to turn red and give way. Tarok quickly strapped himself in the pilot’s chair as he watched

Faldarian’s other men steal a shuttle apiece. Thinking quickly, he took off and turned back to his friends.

“Shoot the other shuttles! Don’t let them follow us!” he called out.

Tayzar went over to the laser gun controls and began to shoot at the other shuttles, tearing into their cockpits and preventing them from ever being used again. The door into the hanger was blasted open then and the guards ran in. Tayzar tried to fire on them as well, but they ducked behind the wreckage, and fired their wrist lasers.

Tarok flew to the airlock. He warmed up his guns, and the guards saw what he was doing. In horror, they ran back down into the control station, and slammed the door shut. Tarok shot the airlock, causing a massive decompression. He flew out quickly with the other shuttles following behind. The wind howled and wreckage flew out behind them, but he skillfully evaded a collision, feeling Harzhan with him even here.

Once they cleared the ship into space, an emergency door slammed shut behind them. Several gun turrets pivoted to fire at them; the guards in the control station hadn’t been idle. One of the shuttles near them was hit and exploded in a ball of flame. The others flew behind the derelict space probes, and were protected by them from the lasers, which blasted the debris into atoms.

“They don’t seem to be pursuing us,” Tarok remarked. “What do we do now?”

He noted, out of the corner of his eye, that the storms on the second moon had become far worse. The face of the moon couldn’t be seen at all, and the storm had expanded to take up the space beyond its atmosphere. Evil had grown.

The king entered Harzhan's cell. He had been beaten several more times by the angry soldiers. His eye was blackened, and he was bleeding in several places, but he nevertheless stood and faced his enemies with dignity.

Gorath was furious at the news he had just received. The other survivors of the Kayraan expedition had fled, evidently with Lord Faldarian. The king had no idea why his advisor would suddenly betray him, but perhaps it was for the best. It would give him an excuse to eliminate yet another rival for the people's favor.

"So, here he is," the king said. "The god man, the supposed Creator that has swayed so many."

Gorath approached, and Mordrak could see that he had donned a broadsword. Taking it out, he made a low cut that slashed Harzhan's leg. He cried out in pain and dropped to his knees. The guards snickered in brutal pleasure at their prisoner's anguish.

"You'll forgive me, but I'm afraid I don't find you very impressive," Gorath said sardonically.

He stood back and signaled his men. They began their beating anew, breaking Harzhan's arms and several of his ribs in the process. Other guards nearby hurled curses and insults at him. Some even spat on him. Mordrak hung back, neither joining in nor making any attempt to end it. He wondered why, if Harzhan was really who he said he was, he did nothing to defend himself.

Gorath also watched for a moment, and then signaled them to back away. He approached the Xanogar, studying him for a moment.

"Who are you?" Gorath demanded quietly. "I remember everyone who was on the original mission. You were not among them, unless you were some kind of stowaway. What were you planning? All over Xodos, broadcasts of your coming have been sent out. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands have been swayed. They have identified you with the mythical Creator."

“I am, and you will not be able to stop me,” Harzhan said, shaking his head. “Just as I die by your hand, so you will die by mine.”

The voice held no malice, only a matter-of-factness that made Gorath narrow his eye silently. “I believe in no Creator. And when your would-be followers see how easily you were dispatched, neither will they.” He then ran Harzhan through, destroying his heart with the wound. Harzhan screamed and clutched at his ruined chest as blood spilled out on the floor. Then, he collapsed and died, leaving the room very silent.

Finally Gorath faced his men. “Well done,” he congratulated. “Order the bridge to track Faldarian and the others. Shoot them down if they are in range.”

Mordrak nodded, and looked at Harzhan’s body for a moment before heading for the bridge. The Creator, if creator he was, had just been killed. He had been powerless to save himself, and had died like any other man. Mordrak felt a sense of relief. Of course, there was no Creator. He was still his own master, after Gorath of course. He would continue to be his own god.

XXII

From their shuttle, Tarok swung around to get a look at the warship. It was far away now, and drifting towards the farthest moon.

“They don’t seem too concerned with us at the moment,” Faldarian said. “But it would seem Gorath will be going along with his plan to attack. He wishes to show Xodos an example of his power, thus making them submit to him out of fear. So he will attack that innocent world, probably within a day or so.”

“We have to do something to warn Liion’s people,” Elnara said. “We owe them so much.”

“How do you figure that?” Tayzar retorted. “Excepting Liion and Miranda, most of them disliked us anyway.”

“Not at first,” Elnara said. “Only after being exposed to us. I’ve learned just how wrong we were, Tayzar. I wish I could go back and change my life now. I wish I had thought more of others. I wish I had actually married you. Above all, I wish I had believed the Creator legends all along.”

Tayzar couldn’t answer her, for he realized that she loved him, but love was something he was unaccustomed to. Theirs was a world where such things simply did not exist. And yet, in spite of it all, he had to fight the urge to tell her that he too regretted not marrying.

“Elnara is right,” Tarok said, cutting into his thoughts. “My lord Faldarian, is there anything we can do?”

“You see the force I have now,” Faldarian answered slowly. “But that would undoubtedly pale in comparison to whatever the king can muster.”

He heard a faint buzz and Takozan looked at the communication terminal. Suddenly, he frowned, and turned back to them, looking as if he had seen a ghost.

“My lord,” he said fearfully. “We just received a transmission from the king’s ship. Harzhan, the Creator, is dead. He was accused of conspiracy against the kingdom, as are all on the third moon, since that is where he came from. We are ordered to surrender and prepare for punishment.”

They all looked at each other, stunned. Harzhan was dead, as he had said he would be. But even Tarok hadn’t fully believed that it would come to that. For while Harzhan never lied, he was still the Creator. How could one kill the all powerful?

Elnara put her face in her hands and began to cry. Faldarian was too dazed to know what to think. Tayzar just shook his head in anger.

“What now then?” he demanded of the others.

“What else?” Takozan said after a while. “Gorath won’t accept peace. We must continue to protect ourselves.”

“For what, huh?” Tayzar demanded loudly, frustrated and disgusted over the whole situation. “To do what?! Harzhan has just been killed! What makes you think we have any chance? What makes you think Liion has any chance? We should return to Xodos and go into hiding.”

“Tayzar,” Elnara said, tears running down her face. “He told us the truth. And he told us to trust him then.”

“But he’s dead now, Elnara. You heard,” he shot back. “He talked about dying but surely even he can’t undo his own death?”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Tayzar,” Tarok said, having remained calm the whole time. The others looked at him. “I have seen things that you could never dream of. I know what will happen. We are entering the final battle between good and evil. We must go to fight alongside the golden ones. He will return and take his world back; therefore we must choose now and forever to serve him. You must believe him.”

“We can’t go to Xodos,” Faldarian said. “Lord Zyndatha is there, and if they see us coming, Gorath will order us shot down before we reach Synestra. As for surrender, only death would await us then. No, our only chance is to flee to the moon, and hope that Harzhan isn’t defeated yet.”

He smiled slightly then. “I’ve searched my whole life for answers. If I’ve learned anything, it’s that with the Creator, his ways aren’t ours. There may yet be more to this.”

From the bridge of Gorath’s ship, Mordrak turned to his seated master. “We have detected the five rogue shuttles,” he told the king. “They are ignoring us and seem to be heading back to the third moon.”

“So, Faldarian hopes to warn the aliens,” Gorath replied. “I wouldn’t have imagined him to be so bold. No matter; that means we can dispose of him and the followers of Harzhan with one blow. Inform Lord Zyndatha to keep watch on Xodos, but I don’t think he will have any trouble. Let us go and end this.”

Faldarian and Takozan looked in amazement. The blue sphere with its forests, mountains and seas was unlike anything they had ever seen. None of them had any problem believing that this was indeed the domain of Harzhan.

This time, however, Tarok flew past the beach to the fields behind Liion’s city. Several golden ones were working in the fields, unaware of the dangers approaching them. They looked up at the ships, pointed and shouted, and ran to get Liion.

By the time they landed, and disembarked, Liion and Miranda were running towards them. “You’re back,” Liion said. “So soon. Where is Harzhan?”

The Xanogar looked at each other. Lord Faldarian stepped up. “I am Lord Faldarian. I am a friend, and have come to warn you. Harzhan has been killed by king Gorath. And worse, he is coming here.”

The golden ones all began talking and shouting at once, horrified at these words. Tarok stepped up.

“Harzhan will not stay dead,” he shouted. “I know it; I feel it. He will return, but we must defend ourselves in the meantime. Gorath is coming here, and means to kill us all.”

“What are we to do?” Liion asked.

Faldarian spoke up again. “We have a few ships to try and knock out as many of the weapons on Gorath’s ship as we can,” he said. “We can’t destroy him but could keep him from simply razing your city from the sky. However, he has a legion of ground troops. Can you people fight?”

“We can hunt, and kill if need be,” Liion said. “Perhaps that is why we had to learn those skills in the first place instead of Harzhan giving us food directly. To know how to use weapons for this day.”

“Will you kill now, to defend yourselves?”

Liion sighed. “This is evil business. Never must one murder in cold blood. But if your king is determined to pursue this path, we will do what we can to stop him.”

“Very good.” Faldarian turned to Tarok. “My men can fly the other ships, but will you take the shuttle we were in?”

“I can,” Tarok said. “If I may, lord, the shuttle we came in still works, except for the engines. You and the others should stay there and monitor the battle. You can direct our attack on the warship.”

Tayzar made a grumbling noise in his throat. “If you are determined to do this, then I will man Tarok’s guns,” he told them. “I cannot fly, but I’m a good shot. I won’t stand by while Gorath comes to kill us.”

“Very good. We should hurry then. Liion, is it? If you can get your people ready, Elnara can show us where the other shuttle is. My men know what to do.”

Liion and Miranda went back to their city to get their children. Tarok and the soldiers walked back to their shuttles, leaving Tayzar and Elnara alone for a moment. Tayzar knew what Elnara was thinking, but didn’t want to voice it.

“Well, I suppose I should help Tarok,” he said softly.

Elnara’s eye misted, and walking up to him, she hugged him fiercely. He hesitantly put his arms around her as well.

“I love you, Tayzar,” she said quietly. “I love you. Please choose to believe in Harzhan.”

Then, before he could reply, she left him alone with his choice.

XXII

On his shuttle’s monitor, Tarok watched the Xanogar warship approaching slowly, as if stalking it prey.

“The shuttle is ready to go,” Tayzar said, with an edge in his voice. It had been hours, but the ship was just now getting close enough for the shuttles’ short range scanners to pick it up. Outside, Liion and Miranda stood with their children, ready and armed. Elnara, Faldarian and Takozan were already holed up in their old ship. Together, they formed a valiant, but pitifully small force.

Tarok put a hand on Tayzar's shoulder. "We will be all right," he said. "You'll see."

"I hope so. They killed Harzhan, but I want to believe that won't make a difference to him." The mechanic looked at Tarok sadly. "Elnara believes in him. You believe in him. He paused and sighed. "I must believe in him as well. Only he can save us now."

"Death doesn't matter to him," Tarok reiterated. "I have seen his power firsthand. You have experienced it. Just be brave."

Tayzar nodded. "Thank you…my friend," he whispered.

The radio crackled to life. "Attention all shuttles," Faldarian said. "Our enemy has just entered the atmosphere."

Tayzar glanced down at the tactical display and confirmed it. Tarok took off once more with the other shuttles following closely. "The battle for freedom begins," he said grimly.

In the warship's sickbay, a lone guard stood watch over Harzhan's body. He hated this assignment; why would anyone come here anyway? All the believers were off the ship now, and Gorath's only plan for the corpse was to display it back on Xodos to remove any further doubt that the mysterious Xanogar was no one of any importance.

A noise, very faint, but unmistakable, came from several yards away. The guard tensed up, and putting away his dread, walked to the door. He opened it and looked out into the hallway nervously. Nothing was there; most of the rest of the crew were either manning the guns or getting ready to land and attack the aliens on their own soil.

He sighed, and turned back around, figuring that he simply felt on edge. But then, he stopped and froze with fright. Harzhan's body was off the table. Instead, Harzhan stood before

him, his clothes tattered, but his wounds healed. He had the coloring of a healthy adult male, so this was clearly a living man, not the living dead.

The guard dropped his laser, overwhelmed, unable to move, as if held back by some invisible force. Harzhan looked at him once, and then walked past him to the door and left. After a moment, the guards motion returned, and he ran out of the hall. Looking both ways, he saw no trace of the fleeing prisoner. Panicked, he ran for the bridge, figuring that if Harzhan was going to do anything at all it would be to attack his king.

From the wrecked shuttle, Faldarian, Takozan and Elnara watched their ships taking to the skies, just as Gorath's warship appeared on the horizon. Blasts began crossing the gulf between them, and one of Faldarian's shuttles was hit, erupting in a fireball. Elnara flinched, hoping that it wasn't the ship with Tayzar and Tarok. The other shuttles flew in quickly, guns blazing. Three of the turrets were hit, and knocked out of commission. But more swiveled around to hit the ships, who had to fly out of the way.

The shuttles flew around to the rear of the warship, and tried to shoot the engines out, but this part was shielded, and the warship continued to approach Liion's city. More laser blasts rained down on the forest, causing several fires. Then, the docking bay doors opened. But instead of attack shuttles coming out, several small drop ships were launched to the ground, carrying troops.

The gun turrets surrounding the docking bay also fired straight ahead, creating a corridor around the drop ships and giving them cover from their attackers. The remaining shuttles kept moving close, firing on the guns, and moving away. Another was hit in the process. Elnara cringed and Faldarian stiffened. Their force was already being decimated.

On the ground, the enemy drop ships touched down in the fields, and Liion ran forward, motioning for the others to follow. The hatches opened simultaneously, and royal soldiers began pouring out. General Mordrak was in front, and raised his sword high.

“Liion! You are a worthy man. Give me the honor of killing you myself,” he challenged.

Liion brandished his sword, and ran to fight the general, swinging wildly. Mordrak parried to blow, and swung at Liion’s legs. Liion jumped up and sliced downward. Mordrak almost got away in time, but his ear was grazed. He howled as blood began seeping from the wound.

Around them, the two armies met and began slaughtering one another. Surprisingly, the golden ones proved themselves to be great combatants, despite their leaner appearance. One Xanogar hit a golden one in the face. He laughed as he watched his enemy fall, but two others stabbed him. More royals came, but the two swung their swords, striking down four more. But then, another Xanogar came up, sliced the hand of one alien, and shot the other in the face.

The one who lost his hand fell to the ground, and the royal soldier shot him in the back of the head. He had little time to enjoy his victory, though, because another golden one came up and after a few blows, ran him through.

Liion only saw this action through the corner of his eye, as he was still engaged in his own duel. He sliced at Mordrak’s face, grazing his cheek. Mordrak snarled, and struck back, aiming for his midsection. Liion used his own blade to twist his enemy’s out of the way, trying to knock it out of his hand entirely. But Mordrak held on and made a diagonal cut. This one connected, hitting the outside of Liion’s hand and leaving a bloody gash.

Liion winced in pain, but quickly adjusted his sword to just one hand. Then Mordrak did something unexpected, and slashed again the already wounded arm, inflicting another wound on the forearm.

As Liion's hold loosened on the sword, Mordrak used his own weapon to bat it out of his opponent's hand. Then he kicked Liion in the stomach, and sending him sprawling. Mordrak looked at him for a moment and briefly remembered the kindness the golden ones had shown him. But self worshippers had no friends. Only allies, and enemies. With a sneer, he stood over him and raised his sword for a killing blow.

Overhead, Tayzar brought down another turret with a laser cannon. He was about to cheer, when the guns of the warship blasted yet another one of their fellows. Although they had damaged the warship, it still moved forward to the city, ready to level it and all in its path.

Why did I try to be brave? He wondered. I'm no hero. I'm just a stubborn fool who came to the right side too late.

With growing trepidation, he noted that the remaining guns swiveled away from them now, and pointed for the ground. Soon, it would be over. He had failed both Elnara and Harzhan.

In Synestra, Lord Zyndatha was sitting on Gorath's throne, watching the monitor with growing unease. He was observing a strange storm that had appeared over the city. It was a mass of swirling mist, as terrible as a miniature black hole. The storms that had started on the second moon had increased, engulfed the first moon, and continued to stretch out through the void, both to Xodos and to the third moon.

The palace cameras were tracking its movements. It was at the factory now, demolishing it. Buildings were ripped down, and wreckage of half completed shuttles flew through the air. But the most bizarre thing was that the storm seemed almost selective in its destruction. Some buildings were wiped out without a trace, but others survived, relatively intact.

He heard a noise behind him, and saw a Xanogar walking up to him. His eye widened in shock when he saw who it was.

“You! But that can’t be. You’re dead,” Zyndatha sputtered when he recognized the Xanogar as none other than the self proclaimed Lord Harzhan.

“Yes. But now I live.” He pointed to the monitor. “Do you want to know what is happening, Lord Zyndatha? The storm has come, and is consuming all that is not on my side. All over Xodos, people have made their final choice whether or not to serve me. Today, I take my world back.”

“You lie,” Zyndatha said, fearfully. “There is no Creator. It’s only a legend concocted by pagans. This is some type of trick.”

“No tricks. This palace will soon cease to be. Whom do you serve?”

“Security!” Zyndatha cried, hitting a button on the chair.

But by the time the guards arrived, the Xanogar had vanished. Zyndatha turned back to the storm, feeling suddenly afraid. He did not have long to fear before it reached the palace.

From a point outside Synestra, Harzhan watched as the storm hit the palace. The spherical portion buckled under the pressure at first, and then exploded, sending debris out into the city streets. The towers tottered, and fell into the surrounding buildings, and the streets cracked open. Several pedestrians were killed instantly by the rubble. Then, the storm expanded, consuming more and more buildings until it engulfed the entire city, destroying everything that wasn’t on the side of the Creator. This was the day of judgment.

Then, the storm lifted off the ground, and took to the sky. Below, the valley where Synestra had been was clean and unspoiled, as if a city had never been there at all. Nor was the valley

empty. Thousands of the city's inhabitants, those who served the Creator, wandered about, dazed but unhurt.

Harzhan looked at them for a moment, and then disappeared from their sight. There was still one matter left to attend to.

Elnara, Takozan and Faldarian watched the battle as the ground forces gradually triumphed over the enemy. The golden ones had completely routed the Xanogar, turning an almost certain defeat into a victory in a matter of moments. They had proven themselves formidable warriors, using their skills at hunting wild beasts to defend their homes and loved ones now. However, overhead, the warship still advanced, so the victory hadn't been won yet.

The screen crackled to life, and an angry Gorath appeared on the screen. "Curse you Faldarian!" he said, enraged that so many of his troops had been lost in what he had thought would be a one sided massacre. "I am in range to bring my greatest weapons to bear right now. Don't think even for a moment that your Harzhan can save you now!"

"But I shall," they heard a voice say.

Faldarian and his two companions whirled around to face the unknown speaker. He just stared in shock when he saw none other than Harzhan standing before them, though where he came from, none could say.

Takozan and Elnara bowed before him. "My lord, you have returned to us," Elnara said, smiling.

"Yes. I have come at the end of the struggle," he said.

“Impossible,” Gorath whispered, his own eye widening with fear and dismay. He signaled for his gunners to fire. “Impossible!”

“Your majesty,” a technician shouted. “We are picking up a storm appearing out of nowhere just a few thousand feet from us. It is drawing us in!”

Faldarian turned to a second monitor, and observed the ship above them. Sure enough, a vortex was pulling Gorath in but oddly sparing his remaining shuttles.

“We play no game here,” Harzhan whispered to Gorath. “Make your choice now.”

“You think you can frighten me, even with this?” Gorath retorted, defiant to the last.

“You have corrupted my people,” Harzhan said darkly. “And while they must answer for their own actions, so you will answer for yours.”

Suddenly, Gorath looked around them, as if distracted. On the monitor, it looked as if the bridge was twisting out of shape. The king began shouting frantically, and then the screen went dark. Faldarian watched on the second monitor as the king’s ship began accelerating towards the storm. As it did, it burst into flame, and only a few melted pieces of wreckage were left to fly into it.

As Mordrak was about to kill Liion, his attention was distracted by the arrival of the storm. He watched with fear and dismay as the warship was destroyed. He knew it meant only one thing.

“It was true,” he whispered, feeling as if his insides were to explode with fear. “Harzhan was the Creator.”

Now, he felt Harzhan was coming for him, to judge him, and punish him for his betrayal. He found that he couldn't believe Harzhan's words of forgiveness; he only knew that he had helped shed the blood of his own Creator. The thought of that terrified him even more than the storm clouds that had landed and begun thundering violently, and Mordrak's mind snapped. He screamed, and began to run away, leaving Liion on the ground. Behind him, some of his men were pulled into the vortex, and he turned to look at it. Seeing no future beyond it, he turned his blade on himself, and fell on it, refusing to face Harzhan ever again.

Then the storm was upon them in earnest, sweeping Mordrak's body away, along with every other enemy. For a horrible moment, Liion could see nothing but wind, fire and strange shadows he didn't pretend to understand. Then, their sight was cut off. Tarok, Liion, and all of the others felt a coldness and isolation that they had never felt before. All was dark, and they felt unable to move. It was as if…

Tarok looked down, and saw nothing. He had no body. Only blackness and the field of stars greeted his view. He realized that he was dead. He must be. The storm had come through and vaporized his body, leaving only a naked soul.

He looked up again. He saw the storm from a distance, now engulfing the entirety of Xodos and its moons. But as it grew, it also seemed to thin out, and finally, it dissipated and faded from view. Behind, the planet and its moons had been stripped bare. No trace of any of the events that had happened to them remained.

He tried to speak, to call out to the other souls he felt near him. To Liion, Tayzar, Elnara, and the countless others he felt with him, but couldn't speak. He could only watch as things begin to unfold.

He saw something floating towards him in space. When it came closer, he saw that it was none other than Gorath. The king's body was covered in ice and his face was contorted in pain. Another frozen shape came up to float beside it, and Tarok saw the frozen husk of the patriarch, just as hideous as it had been on the second moon.

Feebly, they tried to reach out and grasp the other's hand. But in the coldness of space, their arms shattered when they touched. Both opened their mouths to scream, but there was no sound. Then, they drifted away from one another, and Tarok saw them no more.

Time seemed to move at a different pace here in space than it did in his old life. He saw the sun grow dimmer, and turn red. It swelled up, engulfing the remains of Xodos and its moons before collapsing back on itself and going out.

Tarok felt sadness at witnessing the end of his world. Had it all been for nothing, then? Was there no more? Where was the Creator, Harzhan, in all of this?

He saw other distant stars gradually go out. The darkness of space grew still darker, and colder. Finally, the last star went out, and for a time, there was pitch blackness. Then, something new happened.

A single, bright green star lit up the sky. Although still bodiless, Tarok felt himself, and the multitude of invisible souls near him being drawn to it. As it grew closer, Tarok saw that it was not in fact a star at all, but an immense planet. No other moons or suns could be seen, for the light of the world seemed to be from within.

They drew closer and ever closer, seeing the surface to be a beautiful green meadow, with trees and herds of tame animals, some from the old worlds, some they had never seen. No oceans could be seen, and only a single river, which led to a golden palace. In front of this, Tarok felt himself being deposited.

He blinked, and looked down again. He saw that his body had been restored, and that he was dressed in white robes. Looking around, he saw all his friends, and countless others, Xanogar and golden people alike. They looked like themselves, and yet, better. Liion and the other golden people looked young again, before the world fell. The Xanogar seemed more fit and more beautiful themselves than they had ever been.

Tarok looked at the golden palace, and the sky. “This must be the doing of Harzhan.”

“Quite so,” a voice greeted them. They turned to see Harzhan walking up to them.

They all bowed before him when he came up to them. “I knew you would return, master,” Tarok said.

Tayzar got to his feet hesitantly. Then, he laughed and, to the surprise of everyone there, embraced him warmly. “My lord Harzhan! It is you! Everything you said, everything you did, it was true!”

“Now at last, you have come to me, Tayzar,” Harzhan said gently.

“My lord,” Tayzar answered, feeling a pang of regret for his past skepticism. “I am sorry for my past. Indeed, I don’t deserve to be spared, although you have done so.”

“You did what was required of you,” Harzhan answered. “You came to me in the end. This outcome, this victory was assured; the difference in the result was whether you would be on the right side or not. All the people on both worlds had to make their choice to serve me or not this past week. And so they have chosen, now and forever.”

“What of Gorath, then?” Faldarian asked.

“He will trouble you no further,” Harzhan said in a tone that, while not unkind, silenced further questions. “But let us tend to the issue at hand. Come with me into the palace. There, you will see those who came before you. Those who had died, but now live again.”

Harzhan led them all to the entrance of the palace. When they stood at the door, it opened of its own accord, and Harzhan led them in. as they entered the golden hallways, Harzhan himself changed in form. No longer was he the simple Xanogar; rather he appeared as the winged golden three faced being that he had been at the beginning of Xodos.

Presently, they came to a vast audience chamber, filled with people from both races. Among them were Kalgar and Synestra, the warrior queen of old. Tarok also saw his parents, fully alive and well now. They all smiled and waved at the entering group.

At the center of the room was a large throne surrounded by twenty four smaller thrones. On these were seated powerful elders whom no one had ever seen before, save Tarok, who recognized them as the earliest people of Xodos apart from the patriarch. Harzhan himself sat on the central throne, and the entire room bowed before him. Presently, he began to speak.

“Long ago, I created the people of Xodos to serve me. But in their selfishness and arrogance, they turned away. And by the First Law, they doomed themselves to separation from me. It became necessary to save them from their own choices, so I created the golden ones of Kayraan to make way for the final battle against evil. They have done well, and had only to endure a short season of sin, as opposed to the ages Xodos faced.

“But take heart. The times of trials are over. Now, I make everything the way it once was. A new day, unlike any other, has dawned,” Harzhan said. “Once you saw dimly, but now you see face to face.”